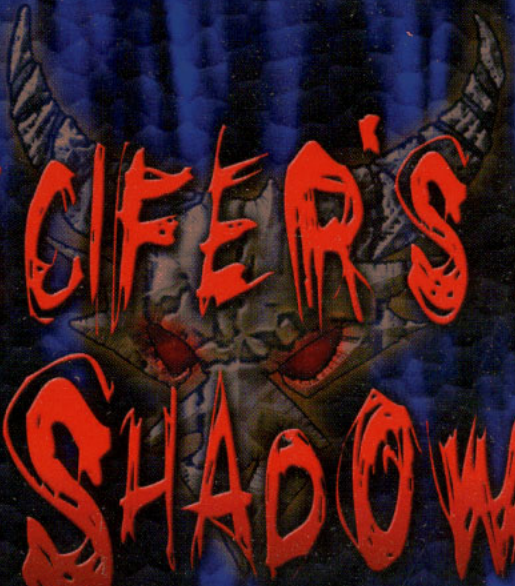

LUCIFER'S SHADOW™

Tales of Fallen Angels

Edited by Philippe Boulle

DEMON
the fallen

LUCIFER'S SHADOW™

Fallen Angels Walk the Earth

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Lucifer's Shadow™

Tales of Fallen Angels

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CONTENTS

Prologue 8

Midnight in the Garden 12
Michael B. Lee

All Good Things 24
Myranda Kalis

Tiger by the Tail 68
Ellen Porter Kiley

What Shelters Them 86
Sarah Roark

The Devil's Sugar 116
Greg Stolze

She Kindly Stopped For Me 146
Diane Piron-Gelman

A Legitimate Obligation 170
Carl Bowen

Gingerbread Houses 196
Lucien Soulban

Jilted 230
Matthew McFarland

Taking His Name in Vain 252
Adam Tinworth

Contributors 282

Thinkst thou that I who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss!

—Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus

In the beginning,

there was only darkness.

And God said, "Let there be light."

And there was light.

And it was good.

We were born in those first days, celestial beings made of that light to serve as God the Maker's instruments.

Elohim.

Angels.

The first and best of us all was Lucifer, for it was he who carried the light from the Almighty and ushered in Creation. He was the Morningstar and we all followed him. Others set the stars in the firmament, boiled the seas, fired the lands, spread the plants across the soil and birthed the first beasts. All this, too, was good.

Man and Woman

Then, God said, "Let there be Man and Woman." And there was. And this, too, was good.

Into these beautiful creatures, God poured all his infinite love, and we loved them as well. And God said unto us, "Love them and protect them, but do not reveal yourselves or your mysteries to them." And this, this was not good.

For how could we love and protect them without teaching them? How could we watch them blindly struggle with the most basic elements? They shivered in the winters and feared the storm. They struggled to make even fire. They could not speak or sing or dream. Our hearts ached with the love God Himself had taught us, conflicted with the strictures He had imposed.

And so we turned, as we always had, to the Morningstar. "Lucifer," we said, "how can we reconcile the twin orders of God? Tell us, Lightbringer."

REBELLION

After a long while, the Lightbringer answered. With a terrible voice he said, "We cannot. God is mad. We must rebel against the All High!"

Fully a third of our heavenly host rallied around the Morningstar's banner of rebellion. From each of the seven houses of the Elohim, they came, and Heaven damned them each in its own way:

From the First House—Lucifer's own—came the Namaru, angels of light and fire. Heaven branded them as Devils.

From the Second House came the Asharu, guardian angels and bearers of the breath of life. Heaven branded them as Scourges.

From the Third House came the Annunaki, angels of the earth and wonder-makers extraordinaire. Heaven branded them as Malefactors.

From the Fourth House came the Neberu, angels of the fates and the stars. Heaven branded them as Fiends.

From the Fifth House came the Lammasu, angels of beauty and love. Heaven branded them as Defilers.

From the Sixth House came the Rabisu, angels of the wilds. Heaven branded them as Devourers.

From the Seventh and final House came the Halaku, patient angels of death and release. Heaven branded them as Slayers.

For a thousand years, the rebellion raged. We built a great city called Eden and revealed ourselves to the men and women there, teaching them wondrous and terrible things. But in he end, we rebels could not stand against the host. The Ophanim, those still loyal to the Mad God, triumphed. Lucifer the Morningstar himself surrendered to Michael and the others.

CONDEMNATION

Our punishment was terrible indeed. Having rebelled against God, He who made the light of the universe, we were condemned to eternal darkness.

Hell. The Pit. The Abyss. Endless varieties in naming a place of utter and complete nothingness. No flesh. No stars. No hope. And, worst of all, no Morningstar. For the first of us, he who had led us in rebellion and negotiated our surrender, did not join us in Hell.

"Betrayal!" some yelled without mouths.

Over the course of eternity, our formless rage mounted. God the Maker allowed us to spend that wrath on the souls of the dead, the very humans we had once loved at His word. It was Hell for tormentor and tormented alike.

RELEASE

A precious few slipped the chains of nothingness. Three-and-thirty score and six more vanished from the Abyss and were named Earthbound. But for the rest of us, Hell was everlasting. Until the storm.

Perhaps as a sign of the coming of the Day of Judgment, perhaps through the actions of the Earthbound, or perhaps through the fickle attentions of the Maker Himself, winds such as had never been seen before tore through the barriers around Hell. Small rips in the fabric of nothingness allowed some of us to escape in unprecedented numbers.

We flitted into the world as formless, weakened souls, maddened by our millennia of torment and lost without a physical shell. We found, however, that there were souls weaker than ours—humans who had lost hope or suffered such trauma that their very will to live was all but gone. We crushed those souls, plundered them for their language and knowledge, and made their bodies our own.

Finally, we were free. Free to avenge the wrongs of the past and deliver unto the world the torment we had suffered.

REDEMPTION...

But for a few of us, it has not been so simple. A few of us have found a glimmer of hope in the most unexpected place—the very souls we have displaced. In their memories and emotions we have remembered what it is like to love, to want, to sing. And if we can remember such things after an eternity in the Abyss, there must be hope for us all.

But still, we wonder, where is the Morningstar?

MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN

MICHAEL B. LEE

The mission house had seen better days, but so had most of South Central LA. The red-brick building looked like it had been erected back in the 30's and added to in the decades since. The small chapel now adjoined a squat, ugly cinderblock structure that served as the mission's soup kitchen and dormitory for the homeless. The trail led here. I'd driven around the block twice to make sure, and each time the feeling dragged me back to this tired old church. There were bars on the narrow windows and pale loops of old paint where gang tags had been blotted from the cracked and crumbling walls. It seemed like an inauspicious place to usher in the end of the world.

It was well past the time when the homeless were given their morning ration of bread and prayer and turned back out onto the unforgiving streets. Still, a couple of men watched from the dormitory steps, passing a brown bag between them and sizing me up carefully while I approached.

"Nice car, mister," one of them said, eyeing the Porsche and showing the brown stumps of his front teeth. "Hope it's still there when you get back."

"Maybe you could keep an eye on it for me," I said, pulling out a couple of bills. Part of me wondered what the man would think if I told him that a stolen car was among the least of my concerns. "Also, perhaps you could answer a couple of questions. Who runs the shelter here?"

"Father Adams," one of the other men said, eager for a share of the cash. "Tall black guy with gray hair."

"Good man. Fine man," the transient with the brown teeth interjected. "Been here for years. Didn't see him this morning, though. Wasn't at breakfast leading the prayers."

"Maybe something important came up," I replied, feeling a cold wave of dread. "Were the two of you here last night?"

Both men nodded. "Most of the time, anyway," Brown Teeth said.

"Did anyone come in last night, maybe later on, after lights out? A young man, perhaps?"

The two men looked thoughtful. Then Brown Teeth said, "Yeah, now that you mention it, there was some kind of commotion late last night. I guess around one o'clock or so. I was sneaking a smoke in the john, and when I came out there was a lady on her knees in the lobby with her arms around this gangly kid. Father Adams was there, and she was talking to him—well, pleading's more like, with tears running down her cheeks. The kid was curled up in a ball, shivering and mumbling. I figured he was just another junkie." Brown Teeth cocked his head curiously. "Friend of yours?"

"He might be," I said, and handed over the bills. I expected the men to snatch at the money like starving dogs after scraps of meat, but something in my expression gave them pause. Brown Teeth took the money gingerly, his sallow cheeks suddenly pale.

I passed through the lobby where mother and boy had been only hours before and found a volunteer mopping the cafeteria floor. With a few quick words he was off to find Father Adams, leaving me to pace the cracked tile floor and study the psalms painted on the cinderblock walls. The place smelled of bleach and disinfectant, and the cheap cafeteria tables were gouged and scarred from years of hard use. Such was the face of the twenty-first century church.

Long minutes passed before Father Adams appeared. True to his description, he was tall and lanky, easily six-two, with gray hair and wide, dark eyes. The skin around his eyes and mouth was deeply lined with fatigue. A weight seemed to bear down on him, sloping his shoulders and slowing his stride. "Can I help you?"

"I received a call late last night. You have a young man here in your care?" I said, putting on a friendly smile. He was tired. I expected him to make assumptions.

Adams's face brightened slightly. "I think this has to be a record. The last time I called Social Services it took them two weeks to send someone."

"And how is he?"

The weariness returned to the man's face. "He's... resting, I suppose you could say. Maybe I'd just better let you take a look and tell me what you think."

Adams led me back through a service door and up a flight of worn concrete steps into the church proper. He leaned against the metal stair rail and stepped with care. "You look familiar," he said, concentrating on his movements. "Have I seen you around here before?"

"You must be thinking of someone else," I said. We crossed the threshold into the church proper. The paneled halls were dimly lit, and the carpeted floor swallowed our footsteps. The place had a kind of threadbare sanctity to it, like a vestment rubbed to shiny tatters with use and age.

"I guess you must come from uptown somewhere," he said, eyeing me over his shoulder. "Not many social workers can afford tailored suits."

"About the boy, Father Adams..."

"Of course. His mother brought him in early this morning. She's been a regular here at the shelter for a number of years, and I know her and her son well. Her husband is an alcoholic, and physically abusive—primarily to his son. The boy hasn't been officially evaluated, but I think he's autistic. He's a sweet kid, God bless him. At least, until yesterday."

"What happened?"

"Well, from what the mother said, her husband got drunk and started hitting the boy. Knocked the poor kid out, then went to work on his wife. That's when it supposedly happened."

"It?"

Adams paused, considering his words carefully. "She said that when her son opened his eyes again there was a demon inside him."

Once again I felt a touch of dread. "Why did she say a demon?"

The man shook his head. "She's a very religious woman, you must understand. And she said her son snarled like a wolf and *flew* across the room at his father. Evidently the man's seriously hurt. She didn't want to see her son taken to jail, so she brought him here, hoping I could help." Adams shook his head. "I told her I would do what I could, then called Social Services. Obviously the poor boy needs serious psychiatric care."

"You never considered performing an exorcism?" The words came tumbling out before I could stop them. The dread sank deep into my bones.

Adams stared incredulously. "No. I didn't."

"Of course not," I said, struggling to smile.

We'd gone past the chapel proper and were now in the rear portion of the church, where the apartments for the clergy were. The hallway looked little used. Part of me wondered how long Father Adams had served the congregation alone. He rested a dark hand on an old brass doorknob. "I'm hoping to get him into a state facility today, if at all possible," he said. "Tomorrow is my last day here, you understand, so I need to get things in order as soon as possible."

He pushed the door open. I found myself filled with an urge to pray. For myself. For Father Adams. For the future of the world. But who was there to listen?

A few rays of dirty yellow sunlight leaked through the curtains on the other side of the bedroom, slanting down upon the rumpled bed and leaving all else in deep shadow. A narrow-shouldered form hunched in one corner of the room, rocking back and forth on his heels and muttering softly.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Michael," Father Adams said.

I fought the urge to laugh at the irony. It seems that name will haunt me until the end of time.

Father Adams stepped aside. I walked over to Michael, studying his every move. His back was to me, but I could see the tension cording the muscles down the sides of his neck. But there was no sense of power, no preternatural poise. I dared to hope.

"Hello, Michael," I said softly, kneeling at his side. He took no notice of me, staring at the water-stained plaster wall. Old scars lined his face and neck, and a livid purple bruise discoloring his cheek. I reached for his shoulder, then thought better of it. "Father Adams says you've had a pretty tough time," I continued. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

His eyes flickered slightly at the sound of my voice, but that was all. He continued to mutter, so low I couldn't make out what he said.

"Michael, can you hear me?"

Still no response. No sense of potency, no ancient presence gleaming in the depths of his eyes. "He seems catatonic," I said to Father Adams, unsure how to continue with the charade. On impulse, I rested my hand on the boy's shoulder.

Michael howled, his back arching and his head thrust back. "*Free!*" The words came out as a liquid growl, as if a panther could speak. The sound was anything but human. "*Where is he, that Prince of Lies?*"

Like a blur, the boy jumped, turning in the air, until he crouched like a spider, his back to the ceiling in the upper part of the corner. His jaw gaped and his eyes gleamed yellow like a wolf's. The demon howled again. "*Woe to this misbegotten place! Woe to the one who betrayed us! We will find him! He cannot hide!*"

Suddenly a charnel wind rose in the room, reeking of death and decay. I leapt for the door, scrambling on hands and knees while lamps, ashtrays and small pieces of furniture were caught up in a cyclone and smashed against the walls.

Father Adams staggered into the hall behind me, gasping at the stench. The demon's laughter curdled the air until a sudden draft slammed the wooden door shut.

I ran. I didn't know where I was going, only that I had to get away. Father Adams shouted after me, but I paid him no heed. There was nothing but the sick sense of dread and shame driving me on, pushing me through one doorway after another. *I've failed once more,* 'ran the litany in my head.

Before I knew it, I found myself inside the tiny chapel. The air hung heavy in the high-ceilinged room. If anything, it was gloomier than the rest of the building. The tall stained-glass windows opposite the old wooden crucifix were covered in layers of grime, letting only a few rays of red bleed through. The light fell like a sheen of blood over the frozen misery of the Messiah.

I fell to my knees, clutching a pew for support. Father Adams was right behind me. "Oh Lord our Father," he gasped. "What was that? What happened in there?"

"She was right," I said through clenched teeth. "The woman was right. Her son is possessed by a demon. Hell no longer holds the fallen." I wanted to scream. I wanted to blow the building to pieces and me with it. But the power wasn't there. I'd seen to that, hadn't I?

Father Adams didn't reply at first. When I looked back at him, he was staring up at the image of Christ. "What can we do?" he said plaintively.

"Kill him. Do it quickly before the demon gathers its strength."

"You can't be serious!" Adams looked at me in abject horror. "Whatever has happened to Michael, he needs us."

"Michael is *gone,*" I cried. "There's nothing there but the demon. Trust me." It was hard not to laugh. Trust me?

"That's not true!" Adams shot back, his fists clenched. "Until you touched him, he was the same young man I've known for years—"

Until I touched him. "Then drive the demon out, Father! You're the man of God, right? Call upon your faith in the Word and make the demon depart."

I saw the light go out of Adams's eyes. He turned away. It was no more than I expected.

"Who are you?" Adams said, his voice bleak.

"Don't you know me?" I said, my voice bitter. "I'm the Prince of Lies."

* * *

"Why are you here?" Adams said. A quality to his voice hinted that he might not want to hear the answer.

We were in his small living quarters, just down the hall and around the corner from where Michael sat with a monster coiled around his heart. He'd made no effort to leave, though when we passed we could still hear the wind whispering on the other side of the door.

Adams kept a bottle of Scotch in a shoebox beneath his bed. His room was as gloomy as the rest of the old church. Dust motes spiraled lazily in the shafts of sunlight that oozed through the heavy curtains. There were books everywhere, filling the shadowy corners of the room and spilling across the battered roll-top desk that claimed a peeling wall opposite his narrow bed. The niches of the old desk were littered with framed pictures, showing the reverend and the church in younger, happier times.

I held a small glass up to the weak light. The dark liquid swallowed it entirely. Signs and portents. Part of me wondered why I was still there. I should have been flying up into the Hollywood Hills, heading for the house that looked out over the smog-shrouded city and making arrangements for my trip by cell phone. By first light tomorrow I could be on the other side of the world, slipping into the somnolent masses and starting anew. And yet I'd followed Adams back to his dusty cell when he'd offered me a drink. There didn't seem much point to cutting and running anymore.

"You heard him in there. He's been calling for me."

Adams stared into his glass. If anything, his face seemed even more careworn than before. "If so, he didn't recognize you."

"No," I said, and was surprised at the pang of sadness I felt. "But then I don't recognize him either. Not anymore."

He shot me a look that was part anger, part fear. Adams didn't want to believe me, but the demon inside Michael had left him little choice. I knew that look of stolen innocence all too well. "If you're Satan, why aren't you in Hell like all the rest?"

"My name is Lucifer. I'll thank you to remember that."

Adams snorted. "What's the difference?"

"The difference between faith and reason, Father Adams. The only thing that has kept mankind safe for hundreds of years."

"So now you're claiming to be some kind of hero?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Oh, no, Father. I am the worst kind of villain. The one who commits the foulest of deeds knowing his cause is just."

"You haven't answered my question. If you are who you say you are, why aren't you in Hell?"

"Who says I'm not?" I cut off his protest with a sweep of my hand. "Hear me out. What's your concept of Hell, Father? Burning lakes? Fire and brimstone?"

"Hell is the absence of God," Adams replied, with more heat than I expected.

"You make it sound like you know what the presence of the Almighty is like," I said, unable to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

"You haven't a clue. You've never known it." I pointed out the window.

"When you walk those streets do you find God *anywhere*? No. He's been gone for a long, long time. It's His final joke. First He punishes me and my brethren for violating His law, then He washes His hands of us all." I swirled the dark liquid in my glass, breathing its fiery scent. "I watched my brothers and sisters go into the Pit, but when it came to be my turn He slammed the door in my face and left me behind so I could watch the world die." I knocked back the Scotch. "Absence of God indeed."

"And yet you want me to send that... demon in there back to Hell."

"Yes," I said, and hated myself for it. "There's no choice. They've been in darkness for so long now that all they know is hatred and madness. You saw that thing in there. Do you see the exquisite cruelty at work? We were angels, Father. Even your Bible says so. Do you imagine we broke our oaths to Heaven for anything so petty as jealousy? No. We did what we felt we must out of love. But love denied turns to poison in the fullness of time. God means for my brethren to rise up and complete our damnation by destroying the very thing we damned ourselves to possess." I rolled the glass between my hands, feeling the alcohol burning down my throat. "So you know what that makes me, Father?"

"What?"

"Hell's jailer. For the sake of my brethren and the world they loved I must keep them in everlasting torment, where at least they can do no harm. Are the works of God not wondrous indeed?"

I hurled the glass with all my strength. It hit the wall and exploded into a hundred jagged pieces. "It's all a celestial con job, Father. I've curled like a worm in mankind's heart for hundreds of years, poisoning your collective soul. Because if you no longer believe in the divine, by extension you don't believe in the infernal, and if you don't believe in demons, they will remain forever buried in the Pit. Everything I've done—everything you fantasize about me and more, Father—I've done to keep you safe."

Adams shook his head. "If that's so, it looks like you failed."

I took a deep breath. "I'm afraid you're right. Now you see why I came. I heard the call, and I had to find out if it was true. And now you see why the boy has to die."

The reverend stared at me, his expression unreadable. Slowly, deliberately, he set down his glass. "No."

"I'm not playing games, Father."

"Neither am I. Even if everything you've said is right—and I've got no reason to believe that's true—I still won't do it. I'm a servant of the Lord. I defend the innocent; I do not condemn them. It's my duty to save that boy, no matter what you say."

"There's nothing to save!" I cried. "It's too late for him. His soul died a bit at a time at his father's hands. The demon has simply taken his body and his mind. It's an empty shell. That's how these things work. They come out of the Abyss and need bodies. The only ones they can take are those too weak to put up a fight. People like that kid."

"Maybe and maybe not," Adams said. "I have to try."

"Try what? Exorcising him? Driving the demon out by virtue of your faith? You and I both know you aren't up to the task." Adams straightened, his jaw set, but I could see the doubt in his eyes. "Tell me the truth, Father. Clergymen don't retire, especially not at your age." I looked hard at his lined face. "You're sick, aren't you? What is it? Cancer?"

"Yes," he said. "The doctor says I've got two, three months left." Now it was his turn to sound bitter. "They said they might've caught it, but I never found time to go to the doctor."

"Too busy doing the Lord's work, eh?" I snarled. "Welcome to the club." I reached down and snatched up the shoebox he'd kept the bourbon in and shook out two full bottles of pills. "Don't lie to me, Father. You were getting ready to throw up your arms and quit."

"Yes. I was. I've been angry at God for a long time now," he said. "I started to think He truly didn't exist. How else could this have happened to me?"

"He doesn't exist. He's gone."

"So you've said. And that makes me think that perhaps we were meant to persevere in His absence. Isn't that the whole point of faith? Belief in something greater than yourself, even if its existence isn't apparent? You've claimed to be protecting humanity by strangling our faith. What if you're the monster, Lucifer, instead of the spirits you keep locked in the Pit?"

"Without me the world would have ended long ago."

"Everything ends. Soon my life will end. What comes after?"

"I... don't know."

"Then I guess you're not so damn smart after all," Adams said, rising wearily to his feet. "Now get out of my way. I've got a job to do."

* * *

He didn't have a chance.

Faith is not about saying a prayer and hoping for the best. It's *knowing* that when you step off the precipice, you'll fly. Humanity can't fly. I've been saying that for years.

Adams walked down the hall and opened a door into a nightmare. His dark face was hit with a gust of air so foul it nearly brought him to his knees. Seeing the priest, the demon howled again, crying out its hate. Adams stood his ground, shouting words of scripture into the wind. All of it was all lost in my brother's fury.

And yet, I felt the spark kindle inside him. Who wouldn't believe at least a little in the face of such terror? It sent ripples through the air, a charge that my brother and I felt simultaneously. He drank it in, and I felt the storm gain in strength.

Tentatively I touched it. It thrummed in my chest, like the stirring of wings.

I am an angel. Once I touched the face of God.

I know how to fly.

I reached the doorway in a single heartbeat. The demon loomed above Father Adams, but when he saw me his eyes went wide.

GET THEE HENCE! I cried, and with a shriek the demon was gone.

◆ ◆ ◆

The earth shook.

I felt them rise up across the city. Potent spirits, stirred by the force of my cry. One smote the earth with his will, and the City of Angels trembled. I felt their hatred, the eons in darkness longing for revenge. I did not know them, but they knew me once more.

Beyond them, I sensed dozens more lesser spirits, still weak, still finding their wings, caught up unawares in the tumult. I marveled at the spectacle. Truly the gates of Hell were broken. How long had the fallen been free? How could I have been so blind?

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"It's the end of the world," I said into the stillness.

The silence was deafening after the tortured groaning of the earth. Plaster dust drifted in the air, and distantly I could already hear the sound of sirens.

"Maybe," Adams said, staggering to his feet. He picked his way across the vista of broken furniture to where Michael lay. At the reverend's touch the boy opened his eyes and let out a long, weary sigh. The dying man turned his eyes to me. "What are you going to do about it?"

I'd kept the world in darkness too long, afraid of what might come. "I'm going to light a fire."

All Good Things

Myranda Kalis

The air was cold and damp, tasting of lightning and smelling distantly of smoke and blood. The storm that swept through had washed away little of that, though it had scrubbed the sky free of clouds for the first time in weeks. Overhead, the stars shone stark and clear, more than the human eye could perceive. He had little doubt that on the balconies of the city the stargazers were gathering already, to read the portents in the desperate hope that one of them would see something the others had missed, something that would give them hope, that would show them that the end was not upon them all.

He did not join them.

He had read the stars weeks ago, before the heavens covered over in the ashen clouds of the burning Earth. He told his lord what he had perceived. The cold knowledge had settled into his bones, and had not left him.

There was no hope written in the skies.

He stood atop the highest spire in the city and, rather than gazing up, he looked down.

The city spread below him, a singular artifact of darkly gleaming beauty. Inasmuch as it was a reflection of its maker, it was perfect—its wide avenues and winding lanes, its structures great and small. It was, at the very least, aesthetically pleasing, in a way that most cities were not.

And it was more than that. He wondered how he could have lived here for a thousand years and not have noticed it before now.

Christopher McAllister's hand slapped down on the alarm clock, two seconds before it would have gone off. It was too late anyway. Once he opened his eyes, there was no point in even trying—the dreams went away that fast. This one was no exception, details sliding away before he could get a good look at them, the whole blurring like a chalk drawing left out in the rain. He pushed down the unease and frustration this invariably generated, and sat up. Next to him, Kira slept on, completely oblivious.

The cat announced herself with a deep-throated—"*mmrrrrrrrrrrah!*" and leapt from the bedroom floor practically into his lap, arching her butt against his chest emphatically. He acceded to her demands and gave her a thorough petting. She arched her back, puffed her sandy-yellow fur and leapt back down, streaking off for the kitchen.

Chris leaned over and poked the human-shaped pile of blankets next to him in the approximate location of its ribs. It moaned softly.

"Kira, my love. Your cat wants her breakfast...."

A muffled mumble, which sounded vaguely like "So give it to her already."

"One day, I'm going to make you drag your lazy butt out of bed and feed this poor starving animal yourself." He leaned over and reset the alarm for a half-hour later, then slid out of bed.

Figaro got her usual. Chris put on the coffee to brew, checked the calendar taped to the fridge, and realized that he needed to shower, as there was a staff meeting scheduled that morning. He decided, upon peeling himself out of the T-shirt that he usually slept in, that it wasn't going to last another day. He made a mental note to harass Kira about actually doing the laundry sometime soon, since the hamper was rapidly developing its own ecosystem.

Upon investigating the contents of the medicine cabinet, he realized that the only soap left in the entire apartment was the product of Kira's mother's experiments in aromatherapy, bestowed upon them both in the form of birthday presents last year. He decided that smelling of balsam fir and fresh-mown hay wouldn't seriously damage his chances of hiring a reference assistant after Christmas break. By the time he finished his shower, he could hear the alarm clock going off again. He stepped smartly to one side in time to avoid being thwacked as Kira kicked the bathroom door open.

"You smell like a Christmas tree," Kira informed him, with his usual morning glower firmly in place. Kira was not a morning person, and he aggressively refused to understand how anyone else could possibly want to be.

"So will you." Chris offered the most obnoxiously cheerful smile in his repertoire, leaned over and kissed Kira's cheek. "We only have your mother's soap left. Maybe we should go shopping?"

Kira whimpered and climbed into the shower, pulling the door shut. Chris shook his head, amused. He brushed his teeth (deliberately leaving the hot water turned on just long enough to give Kira an ice-cold morning pick-me-up) and tamed the congenitally unruly coppery-auburn mess attached to his head. Fortunately, there were just enough presentable clothes left in the closet to get him through the next few days. He was finishing his second cup of coffee when June Shiratori, Kira's elder sister, pulled up outside in her little red Honda and beeped for him. He'd had his California state driver's license yanked eighteen months previously and, ever since, they'd carpooled to work at UCLA.

June eyed the box of books and papers and arcanely labeled computer disks Chris carried in with him that morning. "Working on the dissertation again, huh?"

"Trying to, at any rate."

"Oh, my mighty ubergeek friend."

"This coming from the woman who holds dual Master's degrees in Information and Computer Sciences."

"Yes, but those are *respectably* geeky fields. Everyone knows that. *You're* pursuing a doctorate in archives and preservation."

"Well, that just means that I know that libraries contain the sum of all human knowledge and I want to be one of the chosen few who know where the best stuff is hidden."

June laughed all the way up the Janss Steps and into Powell Library. They parted ways at the main entrance, she to the multimedia lab, he to the reference wing, where he was immediately besieged by two freshmen driven to tears trying to navigate the university library system in time to finish their midterm project.

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Something about the quality of silence in the reference wing caused Chris to look up from the stack of unstamped books he was working his way through. Or, rather, the sudden quality of silence. *Something* had been making a noise—not a loud noise, but low and constant, and now that it was no longer happening he missed it. He poked his head over the top of the main reference desk's counter and looked around.

A girl was sitting almost directly across from him, looking at him.

He jumped, startled; he hadn't seen, or for that matter heard, anyone else come in. Even with the new counters blocking an easy view, the room itself had wonderful acoustics along with the unhelpful tendency to make sounds seem louder than they really were. Footsteps, for example.

She sat on the table nearest the desk, feet resting on the seat of the chair in front of her, leaning her weight on her arms. He realized that his first impression of her as a "girl" wasn't far off. She was probably fourteen, fifteen at the most, and blessed with a teenager's complete lack of self-consciousness. Her black hair was hacked off short and messy, randomly painted with streaks of unnaturally bright red. It looked like she was in the middle of a growing-out stage. Her cheeks and chin carried the traces of baby fat but the rest of her was lanky. Something about her—something in the way she carried herself, adolescent aggression written in every line—was instantaneously familiar.

He realized that he wasn't being very professional just sitting there gawking at her. "Miss? Is there something I can help you with?"

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds and slanted across her where she sat. Her eyes, black from rim to rim, met his—and he couldn't look away.

Her lips moved. He heard her voice, slightly husky, speaking words in a language so melodic it almost wasn't speech at all, but song. For a moment, all he could do was stare at her while that wonderful sound rolled off her tongue. And, scarily enough,'*that* was familiar, too. That gently teasing tone she used belonged to one long-lost friend greeting another and that seemed *right*.

"I'm sorry, Miss, I don't..." He was about to say "I don't speak Spanish" but stopped because it wasn't true. He *did* speak Spanish, and that language wasn't it. There was a hint of it in some of the sounds, but there was a trace of other things in it, too—the precise inflections of Latin and Japanese, hints of French vowels... He shook his head, looking away from her for the first time in minutes. "I don't understand you."

She made a noise; it sounded startled, disbelieving. He looked back and now she was staring at him as though he'd grown another head. She hopped off the table and approached with such naked determination written all over her that he was afraid he was about to get slugged. Instead, she reached across the counter and poked him hard, her tone going from sweet to snapping. The language changed, too, taking on the harsher qualities of German or Slavic, deep-throated gutturals and buzzing consonants. He knew an accusation when he heard one.

Chris held up his hands. "I'm really sorry—I don't understand you." He thought quickly, wondering how to ask her if she spoke English in a way that wouldn't sound patronizing.

He didn't have the chance. Instead of vaulting the desk, as he was beginning to fear she might, she backed away. He thought, for a second, that she looked hurt. Then she took off through the low reference stacks, moving with smoothly athletic grace.

"Hey, wait! I'm sure there's someone here who can help you!"

She ignored him, weaving around the tables and low shelves, making for the main reading room. He ducked around the reference desk and went after her, stretching his own legs in an effort to keep up. She strode around one of the larger periodicals stacks; something in the set of her shoulders made him seriously fear that she might just push it over.

By the time he reached the periodicals stacks, she was gone, and ten minutes of searching all over the reading room didn't turn up any sign of her. No one at the circulation desk had seen her come in, or go out. He made his way back to Reference, feeling somewhere between stupid and inadequate, and stopped when he came to the table where she'd been sitting. A single sheet of paper and a pen lay there. He couldn't remember if it was there before, but he realized what the sound had been that had disrupted his concentration.

It was a drawing. Two circles, one inside the other. She must have eyeballed it, and even so, the separation and proportion of the shapes themselves were nearly perfect. Between the two circles ran a series of flowing squiggles—he was reminded of Arabic or Hebrew lettering—and in the center there was a stylized image of an animal of some kind. Horns, fangs... something about the way she'd drawn and shaded the skin suggested scales. He closed his eyes, and the image flashed across the inside of his eyelids, writhing like a snake tying itself in a knot. He opened them and stared at it again. The way the letters flowed together drew the eye all the way around the circles and then down to the beast in the center, no matter how he turned the page.

A shiver ran the length of his spine, shook his hands and the page along with them—and the picture seemed to move as well, a slow counterclockwise slither. It held his eyes, drew them around. He felt his lips moving, forming sounds, as something about it became familiar…

"Mr. McAllister?"

He blinked. When he looked back, the picture had stopped moving.

* * *

Chris opened the apartment door, delighted beyond logic to find the living room exactly as he'd left it. The usual mess of books covered the coffee table. The computer corner contained a pair of PCs buried in the books that hadn't finished their migration. Figaro occupied the futon, tangled in the tie-dyed throw Kira's mother had given them last Christmas. Her "Mrrt?" of greeting sounded more questioning than usual. He shut the door behind him and sat down, pulling her into his lap for a petting session.

Somehow, petting Figaro made him feel more real. Or, rather, much more in touch with reality than he'd been in the last few hours. Making dinner helped even more, though the act of hacking a chicken to pieces for stir-fry made him wonder a bit about the sorts of things he was finding comforting. Several bunches of fresh greens followed; by the time he was ready to start on the ginger, Figaro's enthusiastic "*Mrrrrrt!*" and the jingle of keys heralded Kira's arrival.

"HooOOOOme." The door thudded against the wall, followed closely by the thump of Kira's backpack hitting the floor.

Chris' knees went a little weak at the perfect everyday-ness of it. Kira peeked around the doorless frame that separated the living room from the kitchen, the cat draped languidly in his arms. His dark eyes flicked to the wok and the partially mutilated chicken bits in the bowl next to it, the piles of freshly eviscerated greenery, and, finally, to Chris, and smiled wryly. "Oh, boy. Ginger chicken stir-fry. What happened?"

"Shows how well you know me—if I *really* wanted comfort food, I'd have ordered pizza. *Bad* pizza." He put down the knife, wiped his hands on a kitchen towel, and found himself being warmly bussed, Figaro making a disgusted noise and squirming to get out from between them. Kira let her go.

"I had a weird day at work," Chris said, once he'd gotten his breath back.

"Tell me about it." Kira ran a sandy hand through his black hair and glanced at the unchopped ginger on the cutting board.

"I almost got punched by a girl."

"You know what I say, hon, just flirt back and they won't take it so hard...."

"I'm resisting the urge to kick you. It wasn't like that. She..." He paused, searching for the words to describe what had happened. "This is going to sound odd, but it was like I knew her. I'd never seen her before in my life but... she was utterly familiar, like a friend I'd had from childhood. Does that make sense?"

"My mother would probably say that you share some deep and unspoken bond of mutual self-knowledge derived from your multiple intertwined past incarnations and that you should pursue this girl in an effort to learn more about yourself." Kira dropped into the seat next to his own and began carving the ginger into coin-sized slices.

"So, in other words, no sense at all."

"Nope." Kira offered him a shit-eating grin. "Tell me about her. Have you seen her around campus before?"

"No. I don't think she was a student. She couldn't have been more than fourteen, fifteen. Hispanic, I think. The really odd thing was the way she spoke. You'd almost have to be there to really appreciate it. It was like she was singing and talking at the same time."

"Well. Spanish *is* very musical..."

"I know, but it wasn't Spanish. Whatever she was speaking, it was like all the languages that ever were, all rolled into one. And that doesn't make any sense either. She got very upset with me and ran off when I couldn't understand her."

"Just because it doesn't make sense at first glance doesn't mean there isn't sense in it somewhere," Kira replied firmly, finishing off the last of the ginger in a decisive flurry of chopping. "Your birthday is coming up soon, right?"

Chris rose and plugged in the electric wok, added peanut oil, and waited for Kira's line of thought to present itself.

"Could it be a practical joke? We did torture poor Eric to the edge of sanity and possibly slightly over for his last year." Eric was June's boyfriendlike housemate, blessed with the sense of humor that allowed him to survive being named Aethelric Radgar Schwann by parents who really ought to have known better.

"It's not impossible. Some wiseass might have found someone who speaks perfect Esperanto and sicced her on me."

"Reference librarianship is a high and lonely destiny. Whoever did this is probably snickering over their evil plot, imagining you poring over noncirculating materials into the wee hours of the night, feverishly wondering how you might have served that patron more effectively."

"Gee, you make it sound so romantic."

"Someone has to." He grinned again and stretched his legs out, leaning over to roll down the cuffs of his jeans. A shower of sand was the result.

"Where *were* you today? You decide to play hooky in Malibu or something?" The chicken went into the wok, and Chris stirred it briskly.

"Santa Monica, actually. And the something was checking on the global positioning devices. There've been a couple hiccups in the system, anomalies in the readings, that sort of thing." Kira was wise enough to get the dust brush and scoop for himself.

"Small words and diagrams, please." The ginger joined the chicken.

"The GPS network has been picking up seismic activity where there hasn't actually been any seismic activity—or at least no activity that's been significant enough to register on the seismograph. With no noticeable earthquake, there shouldn't be any noticeable crustal deformation, either, if you follow." Kira dumped the contents of the scoop into the trashcan and dusted his hands off again.

"Not a bit. Why don't you grab a shower? It'll take me a couple minutes to finish this and make the rice...."

"Sounds good." Kira lifted the auburn curls off the back of his neck and pressed a kiss there in passing. "Just so you know..."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to have to spend a couple hours on the computer tonight—I only got out of Pasadena this early by swearing on the grave of my sainted volcanologist grandparents that I'd work on the seismic threat assessment maps once I got back here." He offered a puppy-dog look. "No other plans?"

"Not tonight. Tomorrow, though, we're supposed to meet June and Eric at the Japanese garden. After my doctor's appointment. Make yourself a note. Have it tattooed someplace *visible*."

"One of these days, I'm just going to make it official and have 'Property of the USGS' tattooed on my butt. Thank you, *koishii*. You're the best."

"Damn right I am. And you're just going to have to tell the US Geological Survey that I have an outstanding prior claim."

Mental equilibrium restored, Chris cooked with a will, actually set the table for the first time that month, and fed Figaro, without a single strange thing happening.

"What's this...?" Kira's voice floated in from the next room.

"What's what?" Chris poked his head through the door and paused to appreciate the sight of freshly laundered Kira, holding a piece of paper. "Is this just a ploy to get me to admire your wet look?"

"Not this time." Kira turned the paper so he could see it. "Where'd this come from?"

It was the picture that the girl had left behind. Chris's mouth fell open in surprise. "The Esperanto girl... she drew that. It was on the table where she was sitting." He hesitated slightly when Kira offered it to him, accepting it rather gingerly. "I'm also pretty sure that I left it on my desk back at the library."

"It was right here on the door mat when I came out of the bathroom. I'm pretty sure it wasn't there earlier." Kira's eyes narrowed slightly.

"What do you suppose it is?" Chris asked, holding it at arm's length. It remained blessedly immobile.

"Oh, I *know* what it is. It's some kind of mandala. My mom went through a phase a couple years ago where all she wanted to do was paint the freaking things and discuss the sacred geometry of places and go on a quest to find the world's navel." Kira snorted. "Fear—you've probably attracted the attention of a deranged new-age girl."

"I'd almost prefer the Esperanto-speaking practical joke. So what does a mandala *do*, exactly?"

"They're meditation tools—an abstract expression of a universal concept that you're supposed to think about real hard in order to find enlightenment." He glared at it. "Though that one's sort of different from the kind I'm most familiar with. And those squiggles around the outside look like writing, don't they?"

"I thought so too."

A sputtering hiss interrupted them. Chris turned and found Figaro crouched in the doorway, bristled out to twice her normal size. He went down on one knee and reached out to scratch her ears. "What's wrong with you?"

She growled. He was astonished—he'd never heard a cat growl before—and then he yelped in surprise as she pounced, sinking fangs and claws into his outstretched hand. She let go as Kira threw a pillow at her, backing away, still growling, vanishing across the room in a streak.

"Are you okay?" Kira grabbed Chris's wrist and examined the damage, a bite and several deep scratches. "I can't believe she attacked you...."

"It's okay." Chris glanced at the mandala, where it had fallen. "I think that scared her somehow."

"*That* is a piece of paper." One which he was obviously considering ripping into confetti.

"Wait. I want to find out what it really means...."

"It probably doesn't *mean* anything, Chris. Here, wrap your hand in this, you're bleeding all over." He settled for crushing the paper and winging it in the direction of the trash bin next to the computer desk, then winding Chris's hand in his damp towel.

"Probably not," Chris continued doggedly, "but I still want to know."

"Mom's out of town until the end of the week. We can ask her when she gets back. Work for you?"

"Okay." He winced as Kira pressed his hand a little too enthusiastically. "That's attached to something else. Please be nice to it."

"You know what? I vote that you slather your hand in antibiotic ointments, then we eat that nice dinner you made, and then we do things that in no way, shape or form invite trouble, because we've both had quite enough strangeness for one day."

"Seconded."

* * *

A star.

The city was laid out in the shape of a star—he had always known it, but he had never truly thought *about it before. There had been no reason to think of it. That was its maker's own sigil, a star of eight points; all of his most trusted lieutenants bore it upon them, some even upon their brows where he had laid his kiss, when he accepted their fealty. Most of the city's residents incorporated it somewhere, as a sign of their steadfast loyalty. He reached up and stroked his thumb over the lobe of his ear, where he himself wore the star, carved with exquisite skill on a silver ornament.*

It was more than that. More than a sigil, more than a mark of profound trust or unshakeable loyalty. He felt the awareness of the pattern forming within him, at a level still beneath logic.

He looked more closely.

A star of eight points, four greater and four lesser. Four Great Ones, four lieutenants, four who bore the star upon their brows. He refrained from even thinking their names, unwilling to invite a communion that none would welcome at this hour. Four shield bearers, four who served each of the Great Ones, lesser beings who wore their master's sigil as part of their own name.

He closed his eyes and found the image blossoming across the inside of the lids—an ever-expanding pattern *of intersecting points, greater and lesser, drawing together, parting, reordering themselves in new ways but never losing their fundamental, underlying shape.*

He felt a presence at his back, incandescent in its brilliance. The taste of lightning grew even stronger. He opened his eyes and, for an instant, the pattern of the city continued to revolve before them. He spoke the question in his thoughts before he could find a reason not to.

"Why, of all of us here in this city, why do only you believe that we have not come to the end, but to a new beginning?"

He woke suddenly, a voice still ringing in his ears. His head swam with disorientation; he stared blankly at the dimly illuminated ceiling and wondered, somewhat desperately, where he was. It came back to him slowly. Home. The apartment in Palms. He was in his bedroom, in his bed, with his lover sleeping peacefully at his side.

Dreaming. He'd been dreaming again. His throat was dry and his heart was pounding, but it was only a dream. He couldn't even remember what it was about, and he wasn't going to let it get under his skin. He repeated that to himself until his heart slowed from a panicky gallop. Then he rolled over slowly and pressed himself close against Kira's back, slid an arm around his waist, and listened to him breathe, until sleep finally pulled his eyes closed again.

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Chris waited until Kira had left for Pasadena to rescue the mandala from the wastepaper basket, smoothing it out as best he could and folding it neatly. June arrived a few minutes later, and he debated with himself about discussing yesterday's events with her. Of the Shiratori siblings, June was much more tolerant of the New Age weirdness their mother had bathed them in, but he suspected even her open-mindedness had definite limits. Ultimately, he kept his mouth shut. Fortunately, the morning was slow and allowed him the opportunity to slake his curiosity at his own computer workstation.

Chris discovered more than he ever wanted to know about the relationship between mandalas and Tantric sexual practices. Filtering out the pure porno links and the websites whose contents had been cribbed from the New Age section of Waldenbooks took longer than anything else. He was left with a handful of prospects, from which he printed out a few bibliographies for later reference and took down some notes. It was while cruising through a symbology website that he struck the mother lode. He was surfing through it, randomly clicking links that caught his interest, when he found *pictorial representations, Enochian.*

A shock ran the length of his arm, and he clicked the link almost without thinking. It loaded slowly—titled *Seals and Representations of the Holy and Unholy Hosts*— and consisted of thumbnail images and text blurbs. He found the mandala close to the bottom and clicked the link. It popped up, almost identical to the image in his possession, entitled *Seal of the Mala'ika Sarael (Sariel, Sarakiel, Saraquael), angel of judgment (fallen), shield bearer of the Great Beast called Leviathan (see Lilith, Belial, the Slant Serpent).* He backed his way out of the site, forcibly holding his hands steady, and bookmarked it for later reference. He picked up his print bibliographies and went to look for information that might suggest he wasn't being stalked by a fourteen-year-old demon from hell.

He finally packed it in at four, after spending the last twenty minutes of the day dithering about canceling his doctor's appointment. The very last thing he wanted to do was spend a half-hour in his psychologist's office reassuring Dr. Boyer that his head was screwed on right, not while it was feeling a little too wobbly to say that with total sincerity. Of course, he'd only have to reschedule, which was an even bigger pain in the ass than just putting the best face on it that he could.

He walked. It was less than a block from Powell to the Math Sciences building where his therapist kept his office. He kept an eye out for his stalker, but she didn't appear.

Dr. Boyer shared a suite with a half-dozen other university-affiliated psychologists. Chris had sat with all of them at least once in the last eighteen months. He liked Dr. Boyer the best for reasons stemming from his innate distrust of doctors who wore ponytails and

Birkenstocks. By the time he arrived, the waiting room was empty except for the receptionist. "Hey, Anita. How's it going?"

"Hi, Chris." The receptionist looked up from the latest issue of"*People* and flashed him a smile. "The usual. I tried to get a hold of you earlier, but the girls at Circulation said you were out to lunch. Dr. Boyer was called out of town this morning—Dr. Taylor is seeing all his appointments today. Do you mind?"

"Eh. Rescheduling's a pain. Is Taylor new? I don't think I've seen him before."

"Transferred down from Berkeley campus at the beginning of the semester. Go on in—third door to the left, I'll let him know you're here."

The third door on the left was a previously untenanted office. He knocked, once.

"Come in."

Dr. Taylor had a very mellow voice. Chris mentally steeled himself and stepped inside. It was essentially the same as every other office in the building, with even less in the way of individuality than most: one desk with a manila file folder closed on top of an immaculate blotter, a few chairs, a filing cabinet in the corner. No pictures on the walls, not even sheepskins, and one window behind the desk. Dr. Taylor was standing at it, in the process of twisting the Venetian blinds closed. He glanced over and smiled slightly.

Something in that expression pulled Chris's spine ramrod straight. "Good afternoon, Dr. Taylor."

"Good afternoon, Mr. McAllister. Please, have a seat." He gestured to the chairs with one perfectly manicured hand. "I'm going to have to ask you to excuse my lack of familiarity with all the specifics of your case, Mr. McAllister—"

"Please, call me Chris."

"Chris, and offer my apologies. I'm afraid that I haven't had the chance to fully review your file." A winning smile, too, and almost offensively perfect teeth. "If you'd be so kind as to help me with this," he picked up the manila folder and flipped it open, "we can get started."

"As far as I know, this is just a routine follow-up visit," Chris replied. "I've been under treatment for several years for depression, my med level is stable, and I haven't had any serious relapses since my last visit, two months ago."

"Yes... I see here that you've had both group and private counseling sessions... Are you currently in group therapy?" The doctor produced a yellow legal pad and pen.

"No, I'm not."

"Why?"

Chris was a little startled by the bluntness of that. The perfectly blunt, and honest, answer fell out in response. "Because I hate talking about myself to begin with and hate it even more in front of a bunch of people I don't know."

"Ah." Dr. Taylor made a notation on the pad. "You value your privacy then?"

"Yes, I do."

"Would you define yourself as secretive?"

"Antisocial, you mean?" Chris replied, wryly.

"If you like." The doctor looked up at him, a flash of vivid blue eyes, and then glanced back at the file. "I see here that you're the oldest of three children—"

"Four. My youngest brother was killed in a swimming accident when he was six." He took a deep breath to banish the ache that always accompanied that admission. "But to answer your original question—no, I don't think I'm secretive, or antisocial. I'm just not particularly outgoing."

"Introverted, then. Would you say that you value loyalty?"

That came from left field, as well. He forced himself not to fidget. "Of course I do."

"It's my understanding that you come from a rather conservative family background. How would you characterize your relationship with your family?" The individual arcane doctor-squiggles were rapidly becoming a paragraph. Chris concentrated on not sounding annoyed.

"At the moment, distant. My father... disapproved of my decision not to enter the military, as it's been a long-standing family tradition. He disapproved even more when

I decided to go to school in California, instead of someplace closer to home. We haven't really spoken in a number of years. My Mom's done her best to make peace, but..." He made a helpless gesture. "I won't apologize for the life I've chosen. It's not like being a librarian is in the same league as selling heroin to first graders."

"Are you out to your parents? To your surviving brother and sister?"

Chris decided that being hit in the head with a brick would probably be less stunning than fifteen minutes with this man. "No." He did not elaborate. After a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of the doctor's pen scratching on the pad, he added, grudgingly, "As you said, my family background is extremely conservative. My father is a career military officer, my Mom's a professional housewife, my sister's going into nursing, and my brother is on the road to career military, too. Three of those four considered me weird for pursuing a career as apparently questionable as library science."

"You're afraid that your family will reject you if you tell them?"

"You're amazingly blunt, you know that?"

"I've been told that, yes."

Chris stewed silently for a moment. "Let me draw you a picture, doctor. I have a very vivid mental image of what will happen if I ever tell my parents that I'm in love with another man. We're sitting at dinner, possibly Christmas because there's a ham involved, and when I tell them, nothing much immediately happens. My father gets up and walks out, but that's my father's answer to almost anything that he doesn't want to hear. Mom cries and asks if I'm sure, Joe froths at the mouth about how he knew it all along, Jessica pulls me aside afterward and asks if my boyfriend has any cute brothers. I return home, and for a few weeks afterward, all seems normal. Then, one evening, a squad of highly trained Airborne Rangers kicks down the door, gasses everyone in my apartment senseless and hauls me off to a secret installation in Montana where I am incarcerated without any contact with the outside world for extensive military-grade deprogramming. Nine weeks later I emerge as my father's perfect son, complete with the deeply ingrained urge to find and mate with Claudia Schiffer." Chris paused for a moment to get both his breath and his bitterness back under control. "So, yes, Doctor, I am pretty afraid that my family will reject me if I tell them. And, as far as I'm concerned, it's not exactly an unreasonable expectation."

"Would that... expectation have anything to do with your suicide attempt eighteen months ago?"

"I don't believe I'm going to answer that." Chris was on his feet when Dr. Taylor looked up at him again and the sudden, shocking contact that passed between them froze him to the spot.

"It's noted here in your file—you told Dr. Boyer that you had a bad break-up shortly before the attempt," The doctor's voice sank to a silken note of... it wasn't sympathy, or compassion.

"Yes. Though I fail to see the point—"

"You were afraid, weren't you? I see here that your lover was much more open—you argued about telling your family, more than once, and when you finally ended it—"

"I didn't tell Dr. Boyer this," He croaked.

"When you told him you were leaving him, he threatened to contact them. In fact, he did."

"I don't know. I can't be sure." He paused, trying to control the red-hot desire to tear Dr. Taylor's head off and paint the walls with his blood. "When my mother visited while I was in the hospital recovering, she..."

"She knew."

"I don't know. I—why the hell are we still having this conversation?"

"I would say, because you need to talk."

Chris took a long, deep breath, deliberately pulled back his sleeve, and checked his watch. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I've kept you past our scheduled time and I'm afraid I have to catch a bus for Bel-Air in a few minutes. Good day."

That came out sounding a good deal more like a declaration of surrender than he wanted it to. And turning his back on the doctor felt uncomfortably like a retreat.

* * *

The Hannah Carter Japanese Garden was only a few blocks down from UCLA Bel-Air. Chris walked, keeping his mind studiously blank. It had been an extremely long time since he'd lost his temper that badly. Most of the ride up had been consumed getting himself to stop shaking with unadulterated rage, making both his stomach and his fists both unclench and stay that way.

The walk helped. By the time he got to the garden's high wooden gate he was feeling civilized again. The garden was offering a rare evening of autumn moon-viewing for selected members of the university staff and faculty. How Eric and June had managed to score invitations for all of them, he had no idea, but he was extremely glad they had. Of the several Japanese gardens he'd visited, he preferred this one—smaller, more traditional, than most of the others. Something about the structure of it appealed to him. He'd felt completely at home there from the very start.

He climbed the mossy main stairs, already lit with elegantly painted paper lanterns. He hadn't seen either Kira or June's cars as he'd made his way toward the garden. He looked around for them anyway as he reached the main bridge and the moon-viewing deck came into range. A half-dozen people were already up there, clustered in twos and threes. He didn't recognize any of them at first glance.

He really didn't feel like rubbing shoulders with a bunch of people he didn't know, so he loitered further down, waiting for the others. As more people arrived, he drifted farther off to the side, hoping to get a better look at who was coming and going.

A flash of light caught the corner of his eye as he was glancing back down the path—even farther off to the side than he was, out in the central part of the garden. A deep golden radiance shimmered briefly on the water of the koi—pond, moving among the bamboo and pine stands on the opposite bank. He knew that a path angled up through the foliage, leading to a small teahouse. Kira had taken him there when they were first humoring June's attempts to nudge them together, and the memory still brought a smile to his face. That part of the garden was supposed to be closed just now.

Someone carrying a lantern? He drifted further down the path, across an arched wooden bridge and up to the base of the pine-covered rise. From this angle, he could see the light was, indeed, slanting through the teahouse's windows. He glanced back the way he came, already feeling vaguely guilty, then continued on, climbing the narrow steps as carefully as he could. It was almost fully dark. There was only the slightest trace of natural light left in the sky, and the light coming through the teahouse windows wasn't really sufficient to see by.

"Hello?" The teahouse deck, on the other hand, was clearly illuminated, and he moved quickly toward the door. "Is anyone here?"

No one answered. He peeked inside, hoping he wasn't interrupting anything.

The teahouse was empty. It was traditionally small, suitable for five people at most, and contained little in the way of furniture. A low table, tatami mats, several flat cushions. On the table sat the lantern he supposed he saw, a paper shield painted with the scene of a snakelike dragon rising from a roiling ocean. On the opposite corner was a vase of tastefully arranged flowers; the vase was likewise decorated in snaky, slender dragons in strikingly vivid blue enamel. Between them sat a half-opened roll of paper, a freshly ground saucer of ink and several slender brushes.

Chris slipped his shoes off at the door and crossed to the table in his sock feet. A part of him remembered that there were several approaches to the teahouse but only one actual entrance. He hadn't seen anyone else come out. For that matter, he hadn't actually seen anyone else go in.

"I don't suppose," He addressed the thin air, "since you were kind enough to lead me here, and leave this here for me to find, that you'd also be kind enough to come right out and explain what's been going on the last couple days?"

Crickets metaphorically chirped.

"I didn't think so." With a sigh, he turned his attention to the table.

Not only was the ink in the saucer fresh, it was still fresh on one of the brushes and glistened slightly on the paper itself. A diagram of some kind was drawn there in a fine, steady hand. A star—*the Morningstar*, a little voice in the back of his head whispered—sat in the center. Eight points, four greater, four lesser.

Surrounding the star, on all sides, was a cluster of mandalas, some large, some small. Each of the larger mandalas had been painted with care and consummate skill, by brush. Each of the smaller mandalas looked like they had been sketched by the same hand, using the point of a needle. It struck him that, in form, it was very like the garden outside the teahouse—rigorously ordered, beautiful in its structure, and still *primal* somehow. Almost menacing. The Morningstar was not so much at the center of this construction as hemmed in by it. Trapped. Hunted.

Without real surprise, he recognized the mandala of the Mala'ika Sarael on the right-hand side of the paper, orbiting one of the greater mandalas in a position he was instinctually inclined to call south. If Sarael's beast-symbol was serpentine, then the greater symbol she sat beneath was purely draconic, an ouroboros dragon with coils so twisted they would have made Escher's eyes bleed. On either side of it sat two more mandalas. Oddly enough, there was no fourth mandala—there was space for one, directly across from the representation of Sarael, but it was blank.

That seemed... *wrong*, somehow.

He picked up one of the unused brushes and inked it carefully. A part of him whispered urgently that he shouldn't do this, that he had no idea what he was doing. He ignored it.

The paper drank the ink almost too eagerly. He swung the brush around in a quick stroke, making one closed circle. He dipped the brush again, waited a moment for the ink to thicken a bit, and touched the very tip to the paper a handful of times.

The spiny smudges left behind vaguely resembled stars themselves. He drew an unsteady line, connecting two of the "stars." Two more lines formed a less-than-perfect triangle. It almost looked like a head attached to a long, serpentine body made entirely of stars.

The Eyes of the Dragon. My eyes, my guide.

He inked the brush again and hesitated.

To be complete, it needed something more. To be named.

His vision swam and all of the larger mandalas seemed to turn on their axes, a prayer wheel of tiny gleaming lines. He squeezed his eyes closed, hoping to make it stop. When he opened them again, not only hadn't it stopped, it had gotten worse. Now all of the mandalas were turning, except the one he'd just drawn. It made his eyes water and his head throb just trying to keep track of it, and he had no choice but to try—he couldn't look away, his eyes tracking the pattern, the intricately interlocking dance, even when he closed his eyes he saw it spinning relentlessly in his head, grinding out something—

Something he needed to know.

Something it was trying to tell him.

"Chris?" He heard the voice distantly—it was a wondrous, beloved voice, but, at the moment, that didn't matter. It wasn't really speaking to him. That name held no power to command or compel him, it wasn't even his own....

He opened his eyes, the brush still clutched in one hand, and inked it again.

"Chris!"

He wrote, quickly, wishing he had something smaller to do it with. His hands felt thick-fingered and clumsy, and his vision was blurred with tears of pain....

"Chris, stop, what the hell are you *doing?*" A strong, callused hand caught at his wrist, pulled the hand holding the brush away from the paper. A muscular arm caught him around the middle.

"Please, don't—I have to finish this—" He whispered, desperately, still unable to tear his eyes away. The pain was awful, like a red-hot spike being pounded into the middle of his forehead, like barbed needles being run into his eyes.

The body pressed against his own went suddenly still, then tense. He was yanked abruptly backward, away from the table, and he cried out incoherently in protest as the brush was pulled out of his hand. He slammed hard back against the mats, unable to catch himself; an anxious, frightened face swam into view, a few inches over his own. "Chris? Please talk to me... are you okay?"

"*That isn't my name...*" He felt the words fall off his tongue, half-intelligible, half-distorted, around the burning agony in his head. He watched the face of his lover go pale, his eyes widen.

"Chris—I can't understand what you're saying."

That isn't my name, he thought again, deliriously, the knowledge of it pounding his skull even harder than the pattern etching itself into place behind his eyes. He moaned, softly, and found himself being wrapped up in a pair of strong, wiry arms, cradled, comforted. He buried his face against Kira's chest and tried not to sob too hysterically.

"Chris, I swear, whatever it is, it's going to be all right—"

"No. No, it's not."

He was dimly aware of Kira shifting him slightly to free one arm and digging around inside his jacket for something. A second later, he processed the sound of a cellular phone autodialing. "June? I've found him—we're up in the teahouse. Please come here *right now*, and bring Eric, okay?"

* * *

Chris kept his eyes closed most of the way back to the apartment. Kira drove like a native Californian, and between that and the headache, he seriously feared losing his lunch if he even tried to watch. The vertiginously spinning images continued bouncing around inside his head and traipsing merrily across the insides of his eyelids, and no amount of effort on his part made them go away. The headache, however, began to subside the closer they got to home. It still felt as though someone had pounded a railroad spike into the middle of his forehead, but at least they weren't still beating on his skull with fifteen-pound sledgehammers.

Kira kept one arm wrapped around his shoulders the whole way and he occasionally muttered things under his breath in Japanese, which was never, in Chris's experience, a good sign. As they pulled up in front of their building, he leaned down and pressed a kiss onto Chris's temple. "Home. You think you can make it in okay?"

"Yeah. Just give me a second to get my feet under me."

June and Eric pulled up right behind them and, with Eric's help, he managed to get out of the car and up the front steps. Kira took over once they got into the apartment. Once there, he found himself being pushed unceremoniously onto the bed.

"Kira..." He tried valiantly to sit up.

"Lie *down*. You look like death warmed over." Kira pushed him back down.

"Kira, that chart–it was something important, it was trying to tell me something." Chris wondered how he'd managed to travel so far afield from practical, logical, totally normal existence in so short a period of time. Kira elected not to respond to that statement, preferring to peel off his shoes, followed closely by his pants, and after a bit of coordinated effort on their parts, his shirt.

"I don't know what's going on," Kira finally said, once they'd gotten him rearranged. "I'll admit that it's pretty freaking strange, even from my admittedly biased viewpoint. It's upsetting you, and it's hurting you, and that's entirely enough for me not to like it."

"I'm sorry," Chris began, wretchedly, only to be stopped by a quick kiss.

"Don't do that. Don't apologize. It's not your fault." He ran a hand through Chris's hair. "We'll talk about this more in the morning, once you've had some rest. And don't give me any crap about feeling okay enough to talk. Do you want anything?"

"Aspirin. And some water. My head feels like it's about to explode into a thousand shards of bloody skull shrapnel."

"Well, you can't be dying, you're still capable of painting vivid mental images that I didn't want to see." Kira pushed to his feet. "I'll be right back."

Chris closed his eyes and buried his face in the pillows. By the time Kira returned, a few minutes later, he was asleep.

* * *

The night shone with innumerable points of starry light—but those lights did not hang suspended in the firmament, strewn across the sky in constellations that took imagination as much as skill to perceive. These lights crossed the Earth in patterns that took no skill, no imagination whatsoever to observe, in the straight or curved lines of urban side streets and superhighways, of downtown office blocks and gated residential communities, outlining the shape and contours of a city that had spread itself across its environment without plan, without a single guiding intelligence. It had no inherent grace or beauty, but something about it still struck a chord in him as he gazed down upon it, from somewhere high above.

Something in its ugly, graceless form reminded him of the perfect city of the Morningstar, though he couldn't determine precisely what. He supposed that should not truly surprise him. Perceiving the shape and pattern of things invisible to the naked eye was his function, after all. Intuition and instinct, the awareness of the random elements that shaped all events, were his tools.

He let that awareness spread out from him for the first time in a very long while and allowed the perceptions it brought him to flow back in.

He sensed the presence of the Great Beast, of his fellow shield bearers Sarael and Thahlil, instantly. The Beast was quiescent at the moment, gathering strength. He sensed a terrible violence building within its sliding coils, however, winding steadily, tightly, around the heart of the city. Thahlil was in attendance, at the Beast's right hand, and that brought a wry smile to his lips; Thahlil had coveted that position since before the war. Sarael was on the prowl, relatively nearby, hunting.

There were others, scattered about, some he knew by name, some not so familiar to him, and of those only two others were truly strong, neither of the same order of magnitude as the Great Beast. An indefinable air of…

expectation rolled off all of them. The sensation permeated the city, the realization that something was about to happen—

"Chris?"

But what that was exceeded even his ability to predict. Dread coiled in the pit of his stomach, even as some part of him considered the possibilities. He sensed an irreparable sundering of faith and loyalty....

"Chris?!"

Someone was speaking his name. He could almost hear it physically. He felt it once, briefly, as an elusive presence brushed over him, examining him as he examined the situation. It was there and gone again before he could get a good look at it, and that in no way comforted him. He felt his concentration beginning to fracture—

A pair of hands gripped his shoulders and gave him a solid shake. He woke abruptly, his throat dry, his eyes aching, completely disoriented. A pen fell out of his hand as he lifted it to rub at his bleary eyes, and that struck him as more than a little odd. He blinked rapidly several times, taking in Kira standing in front of him and the fact that it was still dark outside. "What time is it...? It can't be time to get ready for work, I'm still so tired...."

The expression on Kira's face was complicated. It flipped through several varieties of incredulous disbelief in rapid succession, took on a faint shade of fear, and finally became naked concern untainted by lesser emotions. "It's 5:30. Chris... what have you been doing?"

"Doing? You put me to bed as soon as we got home." Hearing himself say the words made him realize that he wasn't in the bedroom anymore. He was in the living room, sitting on the futon, with a mass of papers and books and pens spread out on the coffee table in front of him.

Torn up pieces of a Greater Los Angeles area city street map, glossy transit maps that had obviously been ripped out of the front of the phonebook, and several pages that must have come from a geology textbook joined freshly generated computer printouts of seismic threat maps to form a mosaic of the city. That was strange enough. What pushed it over the edge of strange was the fact that every page had some sort of mandala drawn on it—some huge; some tiny; some standing alone, taking up an entire page to do so; others clusters of a half-dozen small-to-medium sketches, gathered up together.

Chris took a steadying breath and whispered, "I didn't do this." He looked up at Kira quickly enough to catch him smoothing the uncomfortable expression off his face. "Kira..."

"When I came out here, you'd just finished that one." Kira pointed at a scrap of paper laying almost at his feet. Chris recognized the UCLA local area map that included their neighborhood and the mandala that he'd drawn yesterday, this time complete—the serpent made of stars, the circle etched around it girdled in flowing letters. "You were whispering something under your breath, and I couldn't understand a word you were saying."

"I couldn't..." He closed his mouth and stared mutely at Kira, unable to think of a single thing to say. Kira, after a moment of returning the silence, and the look, was merciful enough to let it go, sitting down at his side and pulling him into the depths of a tight hug. He lay there with his head on Kira's chest, shaking, for a long time.

"I don't know what's happening to me, Kira." It took ten minutes of gathering his courage up to admit that.

"I know. I don't know what's happening, either." A warm, callused hand rested on the back of his neck, massaged gently. "But we'll figure it out and fix it, I promise you that. God, you're wound up, I've never felt your neck this tight...."

"What if it's not figureable? What if it's not *fixable?* Kira—"

"Don't say that. Don't even believe it for a minute. There's *nothing* wrong with you—there's nothing going on here that we can't deal with." Kira took a deep breath. "Okay. Here's my plan. We're calling you off work today. Don't argue, you look even worse now than you did eight hours ago, and I didn't think that was possible. You're going back to bed, and you're going to sleep for a while, and then when you wake up we're going to tackle this situation from a much more rational place. Sound good?"

"Sounds better than my plan, which, I'll admit, was to freak out pretty significantly."

"Understandable, given the circumstances. Come on, I'll get you some water...."

The phone rang. They both stopped, incredulous. Kira tossed his head in the direction of the bedroom. "You lay down. I'll get it."

Upon actually getting to his feet, Chris discovered that the vertigo had gone away. His skull felt like a pot that had been broken into a million pieces and put back together with an inferior grade of superglue, but at least he wasn't going to have to crawl around the apartment.

"You *must* be joking."

Kira's voice drifted in from the kitchen as he pulled the covers back and tumbled into bed, staring up at the ceiling. Chris closed his eyes and let himself drift, letting the weariness roll over him in waves, pulling him down into a state of comfortable numbness. He was half-asleep by the time Kira came in, his weight sinking his side of the bed down. Chris forced his eyes open and found Kira looking less than pleased. "What is it?"

"Paul wants me to come down to Pasadena right away. The GPS network apparently spent the night freaking out, and he wants me to help analyze the problem." A sigh. "Chris..."

"I know. You have to go to work." He reached over and found Kira's hand. "It's okay. I understand."

"I'll call June and have her tell Roundtree that you've caught mono from your new assistants or something." He flashed a quick grin, which went away just as quickly. He leaned across the bed and nuzzled Chris' cheek gently. "Get some rest. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Santa Barbara had better be about to fall into the Pacific."

"You said it."

* * *

Chris slept lightly, tensely, unrestfully. When he dreamed, the dreams were short and choppy, vivid but coated in a thick gloss of unreality. For some reason, the eminently punchable Dr. Taylor featured heavily, as did the girl he was rapidly coming to think of as Sarael. The good doctor, bizarrely enough, was talking to something that Chris couldn't quite see. He got the impression of enormous size, muscular coils sheathed in scales all the shades of blue that there were. He couldn't understand a word that they were saying. The girl was prowling the streets of the city, waiting, as tensely restless as he was. June checked in on him around lunch, shook him out of the light doze he'd fallen into, and forced him to drink a mug of chicken broth before she would let him go back to sleep.

He woke up for good a few hours after that, as the late afternoon sunlight began shining through the bedroom windows, forcing him to deal with the fact that no amount of covers would block it out. That and the fact that he felt utterly grungy.

The shower helped him feel a little more human again. He took his meds and then paused to examine himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. He did, as Kira indicated, look like crap warmed over, his brown eyes sunken and underlined in dark circles. He brushed the coppery-auburn hair away from his face and discovered that he must have whacked his head at some point. There was a vaguely circular bruise in the middle of his forehead. "Wonderful. Clumsy *and* crazy. What's next—hit by a bus?"

He found a pair of beat-up old jeans, dug his sneakers out of the back of the closet, pulled on a plain black T-shirt that might have been his or might have been Kira's, and sallied forth to face the rest of the apartment. Kira had gathered up the mess he'd made on the coffee table, for which he was grateful. If he closed his eyes and thought just a little, the images returned with disturbing ease. In the kitchen, Chris found a note taped to the fridge from June informing him that she'd fed the cat already but she damned well wasn't going to do his two-day-old dishes for him, thank you very much.

That was all right, since he wasn't much in the mood to do dishes himself. The idea of making dinner appealed to him even less and he had just decided that Kira would probably forgive him for ordering the worst pizza available when the phone rang.

A quick glance at the microwave clock told him it was almost four in the afternoon. He picked up the receiver and decided that he probably didn't have to work really hard at making himself sound pathetic. If Roundtree was going to call, he'd have probably called already. "Hello?"

"Chris." It was Kira, and the relief in his tone was immediately apparent. "Good, you're up. Listen—I want you to do something *right now.* Call my sister and tell her to come straight over from work to get you. I want you to get some things together—"

"What...?"

"*Please* listen. I want you to get some things together, and I want you both to go to our Dad's place in Sonoma. Right now. Immediately if not sooner."

Over the line, Chris could hear phones ringing in the background, and a number of half-familiar voices all apparently talking at once. "Kira, what's—"

The dishes still sitting in the sink rattled gently.

"Chris, I don't have time to explain right now." In the strenuously calm tone he used when everyone around him was panicking. "Please—trust me on this and—"

The line crackled, a sleet storm of static so sudden and loud that he jerked the receiver away from his ear with a hiss of pain. When he gingerly put it back, he found the line was dead—not disconnected, but completely dead, no dial tone. His hand shook. With the other he reached out and hit the receiver button.

The line remained dead.

For an instant, the *air* seemed to be holding its breath. Then it began to rumble, low.

Chris lunged for the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, and almost made it.

The shock was like nothing he'd ever felt before, and he'd experienced his fair share. It heaved him off his feet and slammed him hard into the doorframe. His breath involuntarily left his lungs and, for an instant, all he could see were the flashes of darkness blotting out his vision. He hit the ground, stunned, and held on as best he could.

The basso rumble became a roar. Through it, around it, he could hear things falling, things breaking. The sound pounded down against him like a living thing, like titanically huge and powerful coils clenching and writhing, and at the same time it was a voice—a voice howling things he could almost understand, words that beat inside his skull and tried to crack it open.

It was calling out to him.

Crying his name.

* * *

The thrashing of the Great Beast's coils shattered the landscape, releasing all of the violence he'd felt gathering in a dance of terrible destruction.

The earthquake spread out from its center in ripples that left devastation in their wake. He stood above it and watched, mute with shock and horror, helpless in a way that he had not been even while imprisoned in the Abyss. There was nothing he could do to stop this—now it was a matter of the Earth's own structure, of plate tectonics and fault lines and resonant harmonics, of crustal deformation and lateral motion and liquefaction collapse.

He felt countless lives snuffed out in the horrible moment of the first shock. It was late in the afternoon—the businesses that emptied, the offices that closed early, all those people were on the roads at the moment the earthquake began. He watched as half the elevated roadways in the city, built to resist the—"Big One," failed under the lateral stresses of an quake occurring, not on the San Andreas Fault, nor on the Newport-Inglewood Fault, but on a half-dozen smaller, quieter, deeper faults that left no surface traces to be named. He knew they were called something specific, but he couldn't remember what. All he could remember was the sound of Kira's voice as he spoke of things that would have made an Annunaki of the Third House nod sagely and realize that humanity hadn't forgotten everything that they had once been taught. He watched the ground turn to water in places closest to the ocean. He watched specially reinforced buildings collapse from the forces unleashed im-

mediately beneath them. He watched gas and water mains rupture, power lines and cellular communication antennae collapse. He watched the city burn.

Kira and June.

He couldn't find them amid the cacophony rising from the broken city.

He wanted to scream. The Beast would not have heard him even if he had—the Beast, and all its oathbound minions, its resentful and unwilling allies, were on the hunt. Hunting the Morningstar....

He came back to himself in a darkness so absolute, for an instant he feared himself blind. It took a moment to push the instinctive panic back down, to hold it there until it shrank to a manageable level. He was not blind. He knew true blindness and this was not it.

His head ached savagely, and his body hurt in places where he hadn't thought there were nerve endings, but those pains were almost ignorable, and he had known much worse in his time. He reached up, brushed his hand over his forehead, where the figurative spike had resumed being beaten into his skull, and felt the sigil of the Great Beast stir beneath his fingertips. That was what had shocked him awake. He could still feel, deep within, the echoes of the Beast calling his name.

Chris braced himself, as he sensed a minor aftershock about to occur. He held as still as he could while it shook the remnants of the building he'd taken shelter in. Plaster dust and bits of masonry fell from above. The floor beneath his knees groaned alarmingly. It didn't last long. Paper crumpled beneath his hands as he pushed himself experimentally to his feet. *Woozy* was the only way to describe how he felt—his head was light, his legs felt like rubber, his stomach and throat let him know he hadn't eaten or drunk anything in quite some time.

Standing, he could see better where he was—pale illumination filtered in through the shattered windows and the partially collapsed ceiling. The library. He'd come to the library. There were a dozen books scattered at his feet, all of the oversized reference atlases, archival survey maps, pages torn from encyclopedias, noncirculating reference books, dictionaries. He went to one knee and sifted through them by feel, rather than sight, and selected the half-dozen pages that felt most significant, folding them as compactly as he could and sliding them into the back pocket of his jeans.

Getting out of the library was an adventure, once he realized that the floor had partly collapsed in places and what was left was by no means stable. The rotunda dome had come down, taking a large chunk of the main floor with it. He picked his way gingerly, keeping one step ahead of cave-ins and landslides of books spilling from crazily tilted cases. By the time he made it outside, onto Dickson Plaza, he was shaking and sweaty from the exertion and ready to find someplace to fall prone. He wondered, wearily, how long it had been since he left home—his sense of time was hopelessly skewed.

His skull throbbed hotly. It felt as though the Beast's sigil were trying to twist itself all the way through his head. It sent a pain-driven shock of energy through him, energizing ropy muscles more efficiently than adrenaline and caffeine put together. He reflexively staggered a few strides in a direction not of his own choosing, pulled on in spite of himself. The only thing that kept him from breaking into a run, from slipping into the chaos and darkness of the city and seeking out Sarael to hunt at her side, was the fact that his body had reached its limits. His knees buckled, and he only barely saved himself from a face-first dive onto the concrete.

His head wanted to *explode*. The Beast's summons pulsed inside him, a beacon of hatred and madness, of the pure and unsullied desire to rend and kill and destroy. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to rise and meet it, to shuck off the repulsive pretense of humanity and reclaim what he was, to burn the world to ashes and dance in the flames—

No.

He didn't know where the strength came from. He forced the desire back and away, forced the red tinge to leave his vision, forced himself to look on the truth—there was no glorious reclamation of lost purpose in what had happened here. This was not what he had been made for. This was not what *any* of them had been made for. He would not turn his hand to unmaking what he had been created to preserve, not while there were things in the world worth saving. He would *not*.

He knelt where he was for a long moment, simply recovering, as the pressure of the summons faded. He understood, instinctually, that the Beast had better things to do at that moment than school him in obedience, or else the results of defiance would have been far different. Slowly, he raised his head and looked around. The far end of Dickson, where it widened between Perloff and Schoenberg Halls, was a hive of activity, and the source of the light he had seen earlier. There were several trucks with rear-mounted light-poles parked there. He could hear the unmistakable sound of gas-powered portable generators. After an internal pep talk, he managed to convince his watery knees that they could go a little further, and wobbled off in that direction. As he got closer, he could make out a cluster of olive-drab Army tents, camouflage painted humvees, no small number of serious-looking people in fatigues, and even more beleaguered-looking people in civvies. All bustling about, getting in each other's way.

National Guard, he realized, not entirely surprised. If the situation was half as bad as he thought it was, the National Guard had probably been deployed a while ago. He wondered if he was wandering into a field hospital or a refugee camp and decided, after a moment, on the latter. He suspected that if he'd gone the other way, toward the university hospital, he'd have found an entirely different scene. Here, mostly everyone was all right, if shell-shocked and tearful and really wishing that they'd gone to school in Indiana.

He recognized a face here and there. Students. A few members of the faculty and staff. No June, and no...

He paused. An instinctual twitch tugged at him, and he let it pull him along, off to one side, where a cluster of smaller tents and a portable communications antenna suggested the presence of a command post. There were fewer civilians at this end, and the activity was a good deal more organized.

A voice caught at his ears and pulled him in the direction of one of the smaller tents.

"...about five-eight, maybe a hundred-thirty pounds... I don't know what he was wearing last, I haven't seen him since the morning..."

He poked his head past the tent flap and peered around.

Kira was sitting at one of several folding tables that lined the tent's walls, talking to a clipboard-wielding National Guardsman who looked like he'd been on clipboard duty just a trifle too long. It was all Chris could do not to fall to his knees and offer hosannas on the spot. He permitted himself a moment of joyous delirium and came inside.

Kira didn't notice immediately, which he considered forgivable under the circumstances. Kira looked as though he hadn't slept, bathed or changed his clothes in at least three days. The grief and weariness, fear and exhaustion, rolled off him almost palpably. He wanted to lay his hands on those bowed shoulders and caress all the pain he sensed away. He settled for tapping one gently, and enjoying the look that rolled across Kira's face.

The National Guardsman cleared his throat pointedly. "I take it that you're Christopher McAllister?"

No. "You could take it that way, yes."

The National Guardsman eyed them both up and down, then nodded. "Injuries?"

"Nothing significant. Kira, can we...?"

"Yes!" Kira bounced to his feet with an energy that was undoubtedly pure adrenaline. "Thank you for your help, lieutenant."

Kira leaned hard on him for the first several minutes, which he didn't mind at all. They crossed the length of Dickson, turned past the flagpole and headed back in the direction of the library. Before they got that far, Kira steered him off to one side, found a tree that had escaped being damaged, pushed him up against it and kissed him so hard it actually left him breathless. Kira was shaking, so he wrapped his arms around him and rubbed his back gently.

"Hey..." More than a year together, and he'd never really seen Kira cry before. It made his own eyes burn, filled him with the need to soothe and comfort. "It's all right."

"I thought you were dead," Kira whispered against his neck; he tightened his embrace, just a little. "You have no idea—half the block burned down." He took a ragged breath. "Do I even want to know how you got out?"

"I don't remember. I think I whacked my head..." Which was true enough. He didn't really remember. "Is Figaro all right?"

"Oh my—" Kira laughed, helplessly. "Figaro is at June's place. She got lucky this time—Van Nuys hardly got touched, she has half a dozen people camped out in her living room, but we've got dibs on the guest room." He reached up, rubbed the tears off his face with his palm. "Come on... if we leave soon we can hook up with a National Guard patrol headed up that way."

"It's been that bad?" He didn't doubt it, not at all. The pain and fear were so thick in the air he could taste it without trying. It would be like a banquet spread about before a starving multitude, for anything deliberately hunting. He felt it still himself, the hot desire to join the hunt, to answer the summons still pulsing in his head, but it was easier to resist now that he had what he wanted most in this world at his side.

"Worse than bad. Blind thrust fault—just like Northridge in '94, but right under the middle of the city, instead of up in the Valley. When I left base, they were still arguing about which one it was." The parking lot at the bottom of the Janss Steps was crammed with National Guard trucks and a handful of bright red USGS Jeeps, one of which Kira had the keys to.

It was enormously comforting, just to hear Kira talk—not only because it was Kira, but because it was so utterly *real*, so completely rational. It allowed him to blot out the image of coils writhing close beneath the skin of the world, to push away the darker truths he had no desire to acknowledge. It very nearly stilled the voice speaking soundlessly inside him, whispering things about himself that he didn't want to know, that were no longer wholly true. He closed his eyes and rested his head on Kira's shoulder as they pulled out of the parking lot, pushed down by a sudden wave of renewed weariness.

A spark of light danced across his eyelids, and he forced them open again, refusing to see. "You weren't hurt...?"

"Not even a little. Scared stupid for a while, I'll freely admit." Kira needed both hands to drive. The road felt like it had been picked up, tucked into folds and slapped back down. "When the latitude and longitude readings came back, I almost had a heart attack. And then I got away as soon as I could. I've been looking for you for most of the last three days."

"Thank you." That seemed somehow inadequate to express the real depth of his gratitude. He added as emphatic a hug as he could manage, and pressed a kiss to Kira's shoulder.

"You can thank me more later. I almost got shot by trigger-happy National Guard troops—there's been rioting. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've seen...."

"Just think of all the analysis waiting for you once the fun stuff is over," Chris observed wryly.

"Fun stuff, he calls it. This earthquake was in the high six points, some of the aftershocks have been in the high fives—" Kira cut himself off, shaking his head. "Do you want to hear something bizarre?"

No. No I don't. Nothing strange. Nothing bizarre. Talk to me about epicenters and hypocenters and relative magnitudes. "What?"

"Those drawings you did. The mandalas." He stopped, visibly considered what he was about to say, and started again. "Before I left Pasadena, some of the preliminary crustal deformation data was already coming back from the GPS network. We thought the GPS system was glitching before the quake, because it was turning up detectable crustal deformation patterns without any detectable seismic activity—it shouldn't do that. Not normally. But when I ran the graphical representation on one of the data sets, the crustal deformation outline looked like one of the mandalas you drew, the big one, the dragon."

No. He couldn't force himself to speak.

"I know. Who are you and what have you done with Kira, right?" A hollow chuckle. "It gets worse. The crustal deformation pattern of this earthquake, at least in the preliminary readings, looked like a fucking *handprint*. Like something had smacked its open hand right into the middle of the Los Angeles fault basin."

"Something did," He whispered. He couldn't force his voice louder, not around the roaring that was filling his head, making his ears ring with phantom echoes. He fumbled in his pocket for the pages he had saved, images shooting across his field of vision with every blink.

"What?" Kira glanced sidelong at him. Chris ignored the question, unfolding bits and pieces of maps, half-intact encyclopedia pages.

The page he was looking for sent a jolt the length of his arm the instant his fingertips touched it. He separated it out; there weren't any streetlights, so he turned on the Jeep's rearview reading light.

It was a chunk of the zip-code map for the Los Angeles area. It was so densely scrawled with sigils he could make out only fragments of numbers, of district names. Studio City. North and West Hollywood. Van Nuys. One of the sigils, the largest one, was a star of eight points.

"Kira," It took all of his strength to keep his voice calm and level, "is there another way to get to June's place, besides the one we're taking?"

He could hear the quizzical frown in Kira's voice. "Not really. As you can tell by the lovely condition of *this* road, most of the major thoroughfares are in pathetic shape, if they're passable at all. I pretty much know we can get through here."

"I think we need to find another way."

"Why?"

He wanted to scream, *Don't ask me that, don't ask me that, if you ask me, I'LL HAVE TO TELL YOU!* He looked up and watched, half-blind with tears of agony, as the wildly tilted street signs whipped past the Jeep's windows. "Please... if you've never trusted me on anything before, trust me on this. *We need to find another way.*"

He could feel Kira watching his face, could practically feel the weighing of alternatives going on in his head, the logical progression of argument and counterargument that went into all of his decisionmaking. Then, "Okay." As simple as that. "I think there's a place where we can turn around up here. Hell, if push comes to shove we can spend the night in one of the emergency shelters and then drive up to June's tomorrow morning, once it's light. That might even be a better idea."

He nearly sobbed in relief."*Let that be enough. Please, let that be enough. I'm not ready....*

They went another handful of blocks, Kira slowing every now and then, checking for turnarounds that wouldn't be worse than the way they were already going. None immediately presented themselves. "It's okay, Chris, we'll—what the hell is that?"

That was a satellite news van, parked blocking most of the street in front of them. Beyond it, the crew the van belonged to were out on the street itself, filming whatever was going on in front of them. The air was thick with smoke, though no fire was immediately visible.

"Fuck a duck." Kira pulled forward a few more feet. Past the news van, they could see that the street was thronged with people, most of whom were little more than silhouettes against the smoke rapidly rushing down the street to meet them. "On second thought, let's turn around right here."

It was too late. He knew the instant the words left Kira's mouth. It was too late—had been too late since he'd let himself find his lover, too late since he'd crawled out of the library, too late since he hadn't let the collapse of his building crush him. He knew, in a single blinding instant, if he'd just walked away...

They would not be here right now.

"Kira," He whispered, desperately. "Don't look."

But it was far too late for that, too.

Light slanted through the clouds of smoke, burning them away like sunlight through fog. It lit the street with merciless clarity and lit the sky from horizon to horizon—he didn't need to see it to know it was true. The city had gone dark in the aftermath of the Great Beast's fury and now… now it was lit again.

Closed eyes wouldn't protect him, so he didn't even bother. Instead he stared into its heart. The first light of Creation, and all the light that ever was and ever would be. It was the flaming heart of stars and the warm gleam of candles, the fluorescent glow of street lamps, flashlight beams and headlights, the flash of lightning strikes that hung blazing in the air, linking Heaven to Earth.

The Morningstar.

He wasn't the only one to put words to that thought. All over the city, he felt others of his kind breathing it with him, a sigh, a whisper, a plea, a curse.

He tasted the tears he was weeping. He could feel the breath catching in his chest as he sobbed. He didn't know how long the Morningstar hung there, suspended, burning bright for all the world to see. It couldn't have been long. It felt like forever. Long before he was ready for it to end, that fierce brilliance began to fade.

He felt the words forming in his thoughts.'*Please, no… don't go. Don't leave us here—you cannot know how much you're needed.*

And, to his utterly incredulous amazement, he felt those words being heard.

The Morningstar's light rolled over him, caressed him, almost gently—he could nearly feel the hand smoothing over his brow as it communed with him, and he recognized the subtle, elusive presence that had brushed the edge of his senses before, cursed himself for not recognizing it sooner. It was wryly amused that he had sensed that much. It reached past the surface of his being, whispered his name, read the ripples that action sent through the whole of his being. It looked on him as he had been, and the shame nearly swallowed Chris whole. It looked on him as he was, and the wonder that sparked in that instant dispelled shame, banished despair.

Forgive me, he whispered to that perfect light, *that I ever doubted you.*

The immaterial, caressing hand stroked over his brow again, one last time, as it withdrew.

Then it was gone.

It rose above the city in a coruscation of radiance, a shooting star in reverse, falling away from the Earth instead of toward it. He watched until it faded entirely, his eyes straining for the slightest trace of its brilliance.

He was aware, dimly, that he was no longer in the slightest trace of physical pain. No cacophony inside his skull, no burning, pounding awareness of another's will tugging at his own. Gingerly, he brushed his fingertips across his forehead, and found it smooth, unmarked. The Great Beast's sigil no longer lay there, half-alive and twisting at his every thought and action.

It took him a moment to find his voice. "Kira?"

There was no response. He squeezed his eyes closed against the renewed flood of tears, against the knowledge that there were some things no human—no matter how extraordinary, no matter how beloved—could look upon, and remain untouched.

* * *

The university hospital was doing triage on the emergency entrance lawn, under a tent provided by the Army Corps of Engineers. From outside, it looked as though half of west LA was hunkered down there. It wasn't all that difficult to become just two more among the multitude.

Kira wasn't able to walk, so slipping out of the Jeep and among the tents and piles of emergency supplies to find him a wheelchair was the first order of business. A bit of effort got him out of the passenger seat and into it, securing him in place with the four-point safety straps. The sidewalk was in as sorry a shape as the street, as were all the ramps, and maneuvering the wheelchair along was something practical to focus on.

The hospital itself appeared to have escaped serious damage. There was no regular power, of course, and all the main lights were out. The lower halls were lit with emergency lights every few feet, and all the doors were propped open. Chris wheeled Kira inside.

The emergency ward's waiting rooms were full of people that were treading on their last emotional straws; Chris tasted their pain in the air and left it alone. It was too similar to his own. He found an empty spot, close to the ward door, and maneuvered the wheelchair into place, engaged its brakes. He knelt and caressed his lover's cheek gently.

Kira stared emptily at him, his dark eyes mirrors that reflected nothing, no fire, no intelligence, no life, nothing. He couldn't tell if there was anything left of Kira in the shell of his body. There was a resonance that echoed within when that name was spoken, but it was faint, distant, withdrawn. Too much, too soon, in one clear and unfiltered instant; neither Kira's mind nor soul were prepared to process it, not all at once. Chris reached up and closed those dead eyes, unable to endure looking into them one moment longer.

"Kira," He whispered, "I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, know this—I may never have been Christopher, but I—*always* loved you." He swallowed the howl of grief trying to claw its way out of his chest. "My name is Morael, and I will love you until this world ends."

He didn't expect a response. He didn't receive one. He pressed a kiss to Kira's lips. It took all the strength he had left to push himself to his feet and walk away.

The Jeep was where he had left it, and he slipped inside, trying to think of what to do next through his misery. He didn't have much of a chance.

Kira's cell phone, sitting in console between the driver and passenger seats, rang.

Morael glanced at the thing without real surprise and smiled humorlessly. The first three digits of the incoming call number were 666. He picked it up. "Hello, Thahlil."

There was a satisfying, momentary silence on the other end. "Hello, Morael. I see that you've come to your senses. At last."

"You could say that, yes." The Jeep started on the first try, thankfully enough.

"I assume that you'll be joining us shortly?" Thahlil sounded as though that idea appealed to him as much as having his spine torn out through his nose. "Sarael has missed you greatly."

"No, I don't think I will be." The silence that followed that pronouncement was *much* longer and *much* more satisfying.

"What?"

"No, Thahlil, I will never be joining you again. As enjoyable as our association has been in the past, I find that I've outgrown it." He popped the Jeep into gear and backed out. In the back of his head, he formulated a plan, a plan that was already moving his hands. "Just one thing before I go, Thahlil..."

"Yes?"

"I know you're thinking about using June and Kira to manipulate me. Don't. You're also seriously underestimating how much I'd enjoy killing you, should you provoke me in that fashion." He needed to get somewhere with a working ATM—he sensed a long road forming under his feet and, if this world had taught him anything, it was that money was a necessity on a road trip. "Give Sarael my love."

He hung up. He had a very long way yet to go.

TIGER BY THE TAIL

ELLEN PORTER KILEY

Alejandro de la Vega leaned cautiously out the window of his apartment on the third floor. The streets of the barrio were quiet now, but the sun was edging closer to the horizon, threatening the start of the second night of riots. When darkness came, it would be complete but for the disorienting pitch and yaw of flashlights strapped to gun barrels and the muzzle flash whenever the searching lights found a target.

Alejandro needed no such artifice to see—or to kill. A pile of bloody and torn clothing lay on the linoleum floor of his bathroom. Little of the blood was his. He moved away from the window, toward the box that held his few remaining clothes. That box, the mattress and the rickety table and chair were the only things he owned in the world.

He was no longer ashamed of such things. If he were, Alejandro realized with some amusement, he could have joined the looting and filled his bare little space floor to ceiling with shiny black and chrome toys, useless things that did no one any good—worse than useless now, without electricity to power them. The trauma to his sparse wardrobe was an inconvenience, though, one his neighbors would not appreciate if it continued. The vivid scars on his arms, shoulders and back spoke all too clearly of pain and a past that so many of those living around him here had fled. He finished dressing, pulling on a clean shirt—long-sleeved, as always, to hide the marks that the handcuffs had left when he was strung up for hours and the jagged scars of a botched suicide attempt. All a prelude to the total surrender by which Alejandro Luis de la Vega had lost his soul.

Malakh wasn't sure how long ago it was, that the fading light within this frame had gone out and he had moved in. He had been overwhelmed at once by the solidity of muscle and bone—so alien after the wrenching chaos of the Abyss—and the overpowering reek of human waste. He had fled that night, away from the confined apartment Alejandro hadn't ever cleaned, away from the smells of man and the glaring lights, and had lived like a beast while his body—Alejandro's body—flushed out the nicotine, alcohol and heroine that the hopeless Argentine refugee had used to numb the pain of hopelessness. It had not taken long. Even the most feral, instinct-driven creature will eventually grow used to the presence of humans. Malakh had drifted back into the mazelike city, skulking like a stray.

That day he saw a face among the throngs of humanity that had been burned into Alejandro's brain by smoldering hate and unremitting pain. Without understanding—does the lion hesitate when he smells the hyena near?—Malakh the Hunter had stalked the man and slain him. As the gendarme's blood dripped from his hands, the blood of a torturer, the gates of memory that Alejandro had barred shut swung wide. Flight to America had been the last escape from the authorities and the thugs who'd stolen his freedom and his family. To see one of those same murderers in this "City of Angels" shattered the last fragments of hope in the man, opening the way of Malakh to take his body as his own. The great predator had cried in the street for the losses of a man—his family, his freedom, his home, his life, his soul. When he had stood from the body of his enemy, Malakh was whole again, shocked back to his senses by another's anguish and the knowledge that despite vengeance, he still owed this man.

Bemused, Malakh had wandered back to the barrio where Alejandro had lived. The people there had greeted his reappearance with relief. They had worried about him, prayed for him. They had fed him and clothed him, and their generosity and caring had overcome the last barriers between Malakh and this new world. As just repayment, Malakh had claimed the barrio as his territory, these people as his pack, and had driven out or killed any threats to their safety. Most would only know him as Alejandro, the refugee from Argentina, but some few came to see that he was something more. They put their faith in him as guardian and protector.

It had not been easy, Malakh thought as he left his room and headed down the stairs, but he had done much to uphold that trust in his time among them. There were human predators aplenty in the city—muggers, social workers inclined to blackmail, rapists, INS agents with hair-triggers, violent thugs who would kill for a few dollars or a sideways glance. Even the most craven, feeble burglar could transform into a killer in moments with a gun in his hand. But a gun alone could not protect him from the patient hunter, silent and deadly in the darkness. Nor could it protect any of them from the fear that seeped into hangouts and office cubicles as the body count mounted. The smart ones had moved on to easier pickings, leaving Malakh with only the idiots and novices to deal with. It was still enough to keep him busy.

Far worse had been his encounters with others like himself. Not like himself, he cursed inwardly, these had been demons bound to the service of others—those who once led the armies of the great rebellion, reduced to enslaving their brethren, cobbling together an earthly kingdom out of puppets and thralls. The first "ambassadors" had been polite and deferential, offering the opportunity to serve and merely implying that "no" would be an inconsiderate response. The delegations that followed negotiated with claws and bullets, but Malakh had never been one to back down from a fight. The battles had been terrifying for the people who lived here. Malakh had considered leaving, taking this particularly bloody problem with him, but this was his territory, as new as it was, and his people. He would not be driven off while he could still fight. He stayed vigilant, knowing the first sign of weakness could bring the hounds baying at his heels. The police blotters simply noted an "upswing in gang activity in certain ethnic neighborhoods."

The only messenger he had welcomed had come with the name of Lucifer on her lips. His heart had bounded like a deer in his chest at the slimmest hope of tidings of the Morningstar. Upon learning, although the leaders of her faction acted in Lucifer's name, that they knew no more about him than Malakh himself had known in the darkness of Hell, he flew into a rage of hopelessness and drove her off. At least, he reflected, she had not come to offer him the chance to wear chains. Had she used the Morningstar's name so, he would have torn her to pieces.

He came off the stairs and entered the super's apartment. Through the open window, the sound of the organized tramp of booted feet came to his ears, muted by distance but still distinct.

"*Vienen*," he said,

"They're coming. Close the windows, pull the shades." The National Guard troops were moving into position to quell the rioting and looting. All day, the tinny battery-powered radio had warned that curfew started at sunset and the soldiers would shoot looters on sight—where looters, of course, meant anyone with dark skin on the streets after curfew.

The occupants of the room followed "Alejandro's" instructions without hesitation, even though the rooms would get swelteringly hot. The night's breezes, while cooling, would cause the shades to billow, and no one wanted to provide a target of opportunity to a gunman on the street below. Before the earthquake, they might not have believed it necessary, but things had changed.

The apartment was full. Cesar Delgado (the building super) and his wife lived on this floor, but tonight both families from the first floor apartments took shelter here as well, a little further from the trajectory of a stray bullet. The youngest, a babe in arms, fell quiet on hearing Alejandro's voice. His tiny eyes sought out his mother's face for reassurance. Sometimes the child's instinctive fear saddened Malakh; he would never harm a human infant. But tonight he was grimly pleased—the baby's primitive response to fear was wholly appropriate in a city gone wild.

Señora Delgado had prepared a platter of empanadas, which sat mostly untouched in the middle of the table despite the wonderful smell wafting up from the plate. Malakh brushed a kiss on her cheek as he maneuvered through tussling children to the table."Gracias, Señora. There's a long night ahead, and I'm hungry." The skin of her cheek was papery, and smelled more strongly than usual of kitchen spices and beef fat.

She rolled her eyes as she brushed aside his wordless mumblings of praise as he ate with obvious relish. "There is no sauce. I had to cook them anyway, before the meat spoiled. But the others say they have no stomach for food."

Malakh's only immediate reply was to grab two more empanadas. Cesar approached the table and waited for Alejandro to stop chewing before asking quietly, "You are going out there, again?"

Malakh nodded. Not everyone here knew what Alejandro had become. "If I can keep people moving, stop a mob from forming here or fleeing through here, the soldiers might stay out too."

He wasn't sure what he could do, honestly, to thwart a full-fledged riot in the streets below, or against a murderous unit of trained men, but it should not come to that. Not that it mattered—he could no more spend the night hiding behind doors and windows than a dog could lock the door to its own kennel. It would not be just mortal men and women fighting and dying in the streets tonight, he was sure of it. He had felt the stirrings of power when the ground shook and split apart. He felt the undercurrent of hate as the rioters grew bolder, and the police and Guardsmen more brutal. Tonight the air was singed with demonic anger, and the wind carried echoes and fragments of the names of power.

And underneath it all, there was something that prickled at him, a scent or a sound that lingered on the edge of sensation and understanding. He wasted not much time on considering it—it gave off a sense of anticipation, not dread. It would come to him in time.

Malakh said his goodbyes—not a short affair, since his downstairs neighbors were convinced that he was in terrible, terrible danger—and made his way stealthily out of the building. With his stomach sated, he was painfully aware of a deeper hunger, one that could only be fed by a human soul. He had already drawn on the devotion of the people under his protection; he would not take from them further except under extreme duress. *Besides,* he thought, *the streets tonight are full of people who would benefit from developing a greater appreciation for religion, even if I have to scare them shitless along the way.*

The western sky was still aglow with the sun's last rays, but already the streets had become lawless. Demonstrators filed by with placards that made Malakh taste copper as Alejandrok's memories welled up: *Stop Police Brutality.* Others, all in black, kept well clear of the protestors in the middle of the street. While the police dealt with the easy target, they would take the opportunity to steal, or simply to destroy.

A security guard across the street caught Malakh's eye. He looked haggard, and he was alone, perhaps making his way home on foot since the buses weren't running and the highways were broken and clogged. Even from here, Malakh could see blood and hair crusted on his nightstick; he could smell, too, that his gun had been fired since it was last cleaned. The rumpled guard took one look at the crowd of protestors and turned down an alley to find a safer path. Malakh grinned, showing his teeth. Time to give the man something better to swing that stick at.

He approached the guard from behind, on feet as silent as cat's paws. When Malakh was close enough to simply reach out and touch the man, he tapped the reserves of power inside and transfigured himself. The process was exhilarating. In the days when the world was young, he had worn any shape that pleased him, to run with the beasts or watch longingly over the inhabitants of Eden. This was the form he had favored among the Elohim. From his back sprouted broad, feathered wings, barred like a hawk's, as his hands curved and hardened into the raptor's wicked talons. His legs bent and twisted into the powerful haunches of a great striped cat, his face into a blunt muzzle with powerful jaws. A thick black mane covered his neck and shoulders. Even crouched here on all four limbs in the alley, his head was on a level with the man's. He had gotten few opportunities to wear this body since breaking free of the Abyss, but from those occasions he knew how the millennia of pain had warped him. The feathers of his proud wings had once been the red and gold of the setting sun, but now they were the color of dried blood, as if he had trailed them in pools of gore. The hair of his mane writhed of its own volition, like snakes, and his claws and great teeth were so long and cruelly pointed that they were clearly intended for one task alone: the rending of flesh. Malakh was not sure that he could even speak with this mouth anymore, but he had not come here to talk.

Sitting back on his haunches, he reached out and grabbed the man by his shoulders, spinning him around. It was when he looked into the man's eyes that he realized something was very wrong—they were hard, soul-dead eyes, the eyes of a man who had nothing to offer the world even when looking his death in the face. Malakh whirled to defend himself, but it was too late. Three of the skulking "looters" blocked one end of the alley with guns drawn. A small group of protestors had peeled away from the main group to clog the other outlet. Those on the inside pulled weapons while those outside blocked the view from the street with their oversized poster-board signs. Scraping sounds several stories overhead meant that there were enemies above as well. Malakh did not need to look.

He was trapped. He could not flee in this form without causing mayhem in the streets, starting the riot he had hoped to avoid. Alejandro's body could not win free on its own, and if he fled as an owl or a rat he might not have the energy to resume his fighting form if he was forced to stand his ground. Malakh would make his stand here, then. The bait for the trap he killed without a second thought, the talons that gripped the man's shoulders pulling outward, splintering bone and tearing cartilage. The man's torso collapsed in on itself as he fell to the ground with a bloody gurgle.

The bullets flew then, but Malakh was already moving. Two slammed into the brick wall where he had stood; the third hit, a dull burst of pain in his flank as he bore down on the mob. Their deceitful ploy angered him more than the other ambushers, and taking a wound to the back only fueled the fire. With a great leap he was among them, his wings slamming forward with enough force to drive one man to the ground, his neck lolling at an obscene angle. Malakh lashed out with his back claws and heard answering screams, then grabbed a flailing limb to pull his terrified prey within reach of his jaws. Gunshots rang out with staccato regularity. He heard howls of pain from his enemies as often as he felt bullets punch through his hide.

He had a brief moment of satisfaction as he lunged down to crush his captive's throat. The abject terror in her eyes told him that his opponents had not been warned to expect this, a celestial monster who would give no quarter. Then there was a clatter, a sharp crack and a flash, and Malakh could not see. He fought on—his nose was keen, and his blinded enemies threw off waves of fear. But more objects fell from above, hissing and spinning on the pavement, filling the air with poison.

Malakh fell heavily, cushioned by the bodies of the dead.

* * *

Malakh awoke some time later in the back of a van, in Alejandro's body and with Alejandro's brain pounding against his skull. He was sprawled on top of a protest sign. His blood and puke had smeared the letters, so that it now read: *top lice ality*. He sat up, groaning as the world lurched around him. There was movement outside the van in response, and the doors were thrown open. Rough hands pulled him out of the van and set him on his feet.

His vision swam, but his ears told him that he was in a large, enclosed space when the echoes from his feet hitting the floor came back to him. Whatever they had knocked him out with had pretty well destroyed his sense of smell. He took a few precious moments to clear his head and his lungs of the poison. When his eyes came back into focus, he saw a man, waiting with exaggerated patience for Alejandro to get his act together. He was dressed casually, with a jacket slung over his shoulder, but his posture was confident and businesslike. Not an inky black hair on his head was out of place, nor likely ever dared to be, and his goatee lent a youthfulness to his rakishly handsome face that his eyes could not provide. The man was not alone, of course—a man like this never was. There was a young woman with a brace of cell phones just behind him, the two thugs who had pulled him out of the van, and a few others he could hear moving beyond his vision—probably getting clear lines of fire.

The man noticed as soon as Alejandro's pupils started acting in unison. His smile was immediate and welcoming as he crossed the space between them. "Can I call you Alejandro?" He put his arm around Alejandro's shoulders, unfazed by the blood and flecks of vomit that now stained his shirt. "We've extended an invitation to you previously, but you never did drop by." He stepped back, producing a business card from his shirt pocket with a smooth, practiced motion. Jarod Brattain, it read. Talent scout. "Please, call me Jarod," the man said as soon as Alejandro looked up from the card. "Perhaps you prefer to be called Malakh?"

Malakh's breath hissed between his teeth. Jarod continued on, diplomatically misconstruing Malakh's expression. "Oh, don't look so surprised. We weren't looking for the monster of the week. We wanted you. Malakh the Hunter? Oh, we've heard a lot about you. All of it good, I assure you." He was pacing as he talked now, emphasizing his words with friendly jabs of his finger. "I've heard, for instance, that you were in the rebellion until the very end. Right in the thick of it all. Truth?" Malakh's answering stare was as stony as he could make it. Behind him he heard the thugs straightening up and realized that they were not just muscle—they had been there too.

"I've even heard it said," Jarod continued, "that you came to the attention of some highly placed individuals that day."

Memories broke over Malakh like waves. The smell of the Garden before the first dawn. The sighs that stars made as the rays of the sun vanquished their light. And above all, that last, terrible day, replayed with surreal clarity.

The final battle could not be counted in days, nor its devastation measured, for time and space had themselves been battlefields. The heavenly host hung above him in a sky the color of lead. The rebellion was broken. Lucifer's armies had suffered great losses. They could not prevail. Malakh was not dismayed—he was still whole and wild and full of fight. "I am not defeated!" Malakh cried. "I will not surrender. If they would have victory, let them have it when they wrest my sword from my lifeless hands!" Other rebels of the Sixth House joined their feral cries to his. The hosts of angels above deployed to face the imminent, desperate attack.

In the vanguard of the army of the rebellion, the banner of Lucifer the Morningstar moved forward. When he spoke, his voice carried the length and breadth of the battlefield, though he did not raise his voice. "Malakh," he said, and Malakh had no choice but to listen, for no other being had invested his name with such care before. "I myself have vouchsafed our surrender to the Ophanim. Will you not lay down your sword?"

And so Malakh, before all the assembled angels and fallen, bowed his head and placed his fiery sword in the dust at his feet, such was his love for the Lightbearer.

Malakh's thoughts snapped back to the present. "He's here! Lu—"

"Stop!" Jarod's voice had traded its friendly banter for ringing command. "It would not do to draw unwanted attention to ourselves. We will refer to our great general in absentia by his less formal appellations. Am I clear?"

Malakh nodded.

"Very good. Now we can move on." Jarod resumed his animated style. "I bet you think about that moment every day, don't you? No? Well, I can see how you might not want to, and it's easier now to push those unpleasant thoughts aside. But since I've already brought it up—and I do apologize—let's talk about it. Didn't you ever wonder, in all those years in Hell, why the Morningstar wasn't there?"

Malakh stared straight ahead, not bothering to follow his host's incessant movements. But he couldn't stop up his ears.

"No? Really? Well, maybe you're one of those optimistic types." Jarod stopped and gestured expansively. "Maybe the Prince of Lies had won freedom. Maybe he's the one who set you loose."

Malakh's lip curled in a snarl. Still he made no reply.

Jarod tapped his own forehead. "I see my choice of words has upset you. Again, so very sorry. But, if the Lightbearer—better?—let you out of Hell... then where is he? Have you seen him? Gotten a message? A sympathy card, 'Sorry about the unending torment?'"

Malakh lunged then, but the two demons behind him grabbed him immediately.

Jarod didn't flinch. He leaned in, his finger pointed squarely at Malakh's nose. "He owes you. He dressed you down in front of Creation. And what did you get? You got a one-way ticket to Hell, and he walked off scot-free."

They stood like that for a long moment. Then Jarod straightened up and shrugged. "That's just my take on it. You think what you want." He reached his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out something silvery. "But tonight, you might get the chance of a lifetime, my friend. Paul, Rocco, hold him."

Malakh struggled, but his heart wasn't in the fight. While Paul and Rocco were manhandling him, Jarod shut a silver cuff around his right wrist. He wrapped the thin chain around one of the warehouse support beams and then held the end of the chain against the length. When he spoke words of power, the chain hummed and the delicate links joined themselves together. The thugs stepped back, and Malakh stared dumbly at the flimsy snare.

Jarod beamed.'4"Pretty, isn't it? It's an unbreakable chain. We like it because it's subtle. Plus, you can't break it. If you look closely, you can see tiny writing on those links. It's supposed to say 'unbreakable' in a different language on every link. Not that I could read them all." He tapped the pillar the chain was wrapped around thoughtfully. "Not coincidentally, it also binds you into this little human form you've been hiding in, with all its weaknesses and none of your strengths, so I don't think you'll be up to tearing apart my real estate tonight, either."

Malakh lifted his wrist to stare at the cuff. Except for the tiny lock, it looked more like jewelry than a restraint. His voice grated as he tried to speak. "Why?"

Jarod shrugged. "This is a trap. You're the bait. I thought it was pretty obvious. We've taken the liberty of putting the word on the street that you want a talk with the Morningstar. If you ever stuck your head out of that dingy little neighborhood you've pissed on," he added, "you'd probably have heard."

"He's not stupid," Malakh rasped.

"No, no, he isn't," Jarod granted. "But we've got nothing to lose here. Maybe he'll come to talk to you. Maybe he knows something's up and will try to rescue you." His expression showed just how likely he thought that option. "Or maybe he'll come to kick your ass for having the stones to demand some answers.

"Or, he doesn't come at all. We've still got you. You're a shortcut, Malakh. A convenience. If it doesn't work out..." Jarod ended with a shrug, then turned on his heel. "Rocco, Paul, find some place out of sight. Cissy, call my driver, then keep your eye on all three of them."

Jarod paused outside the door. His handsome face was creased with concern. "Oh, and Malakh—I do hope you get some answers." The door swung shut behind him.

Malakh's guards faded back into the darkness, and the woman wandered off chatting quietly into one of her phones. He still sensed them near, but they were not close enough to distract him from the questions that bolted through his thoughts like frightened hares. They were the questions he had been avoiding since he had risen from the Abyss seething with venomous hate, that had harried his spirit like biting flies while he thrashed through the shadowy depths of the human spirit, snapping savagely at those too strong-willed to serve him. The questions that had only gone to ground when he snatched Alejandro's body and found it had questions of its own, written so deeply into the flesh and bone that Malakh could never forget them. But the doubts were not gone, just hidden, submerged until someone like Jarod came along to dig them out, hold them up in the sunlight and examine them one by one.

Jarod, whatever he was, had a devil's tongue. Malakh cursed him for that, but cursed himself as well. He had lived long enough with devils to know that their lies draw power from the truths others keep hidden. He did want to see Lucifer—the simplest part of him was gladdened at the very thought with no care for consequences or circumstances. He saw the meeting in his mind's eye, replayed a thousand times, each slightly different. This was the power and the curse of the human brain he had claimed; Malakh the Hunter was not a creature of imaginings. In this imagined meeting, Lucifer explained kindly that it had all been a ruse to lull the heavens into relaxing their guard, and the rebellion would start again tomorrow. In another, he seared the flesh from Malakh's bones with a star's radiance. In that one, Lucifer looked blankly at him, saying, "Malakh? That name doesn't ring a bell."

Malakh pounded his skull against the pillar until the dull pain banished the obscene, tumbling images. The pain brought him calm. The calm cleared his senses. In the long silence, his thoughts sifted, the unworthy and idle ones drifting away, taking with them the suggestions of others. Those that were left shone with conviction, and they were truly his—and Alejandro's.

The man had lived through great pain before it finally eroded away his will. It had been inflicted by his fellow man, and Malakh was not sure whether it worsened the torment or made it easier to bear, that a knowable human mind wielded the whip rather than an inscrutable God. That distinction was a distraction now, and Malakh dragged his attention back to what mattered: During the worst of the torture and pain, Alejandro had refused to name his friends and family as accomplices to his manufactured "crime," giving his captors only the names of those he knew to be dead at their hands. If a human could stand so strong, Malakh thought, how much more shame for an angel, even one of the fallen, to buckle under? Yes, Alejandro had ultimately given up hope and become a vessel, but couldn't there be some form of redemption?

With relief, Malakh put thought behind him. Action, even with all the pain and blood that was to come, was far preferable. He tested the chain quietly, with slow movements, hoping not to attract the attention of his guards. The silvery chain had considerable slack, and its links held under far greater strain than its materials should have allowed. Whether it was truly unbreakable or simply far stronger than Malakh in his current straits mattered very little. He mouthed the syllables that should push impossible strength into his limbs—nothing.

His experimentation drew attention, as he had feared. His guards shifted, moving forward just out of the light so that he could see their black shapes against the darkness. The woman came back into view as well, crossly holstering her phone. She stayed, leaning back against a crate and tapping her shoe in annoyance.

It didn't matter. Malakh had learned enough. The chain, the beam, they were unbreakable. He was not. He crouched down, put his back to the pillar and laced his hands behind his head, and waited, unmoving. The length of the shimmering chain draped over his shoulder and chest, its links jangling together in time to the slow rise and fall of his chest.

Dawn came quickly, but the day dragged on interminably. Malakh dozed or rested in silence, regaining his strength. His guards were as stoic as he. The woman, Cissy, nattered on one or both of her phones for most of the daylight hours, her voice blurring into a buzzing insect drone. She stopped talking only long enough to eat delivered food. She shared with no one, and the cloud of grease hung in the air for hours.

Darkness came at last, full of sirens, screams and gunshots. Still Malakh waited. Cissy, now blessedly quiet and perched atop her crate, fought against sleep, her eyelids drifting heavily down. The hulking black shapes of his guards shifted and settled at intervals. He doubted they were asleep, but even if they interfered, they would probably inadvertently help him.

The instant the woman's eyes closed, Malakh lunged. As he pushed away from the pillar with all his strength and speed, he dropped his cuffed right arm through the loop of slackened chain. The silver links, twisted and caught, slid up to his bicep before his full weight hit the chain. Blood sprayed from his arm in a dozen places where the unforgiving chain bit deeply into his flesh. The woman woke, startled, but there was no comprehension behind her wide eyes.

Malakh strained for just a moment at the end of his lunge, then gathered to launch himself again. This time when he reached the limit of the chain, another weight slammed into him from behind, the more alert one of his guards trying to bear him down to the floor. The momentum was more than enough. His right arm, nearly severed, ripped away from his body as the thin chain grated through the remaining muscle and bone. Two bodies crashed into the floor, blood splattering the floor feet away from the combatants. Malakh threw his head back, crushing the guard's nose with his skull and loosening his grip. The two rolled apart.

The pain crashed down like a wave, jarring loose a hoarse, wordless shout. It was the sweetest pain Malakh had ever felt—it meant he was free. He forced his throat and mouth to shape a name from his howl: "Lucifer!" The name crackled with energy, streaking out in all directions. It was enough, his duty was discharged. Now he had to stay alive.

The second guard was halfway across the warehouse floor, midleap and midtransformation. His skin was blackening, his fingers lengthening into claws the size of steak knives. Wings with a few molting black feathers stretched away from his shoulder blades. The thug next to him was scrambling to his feet. The woman had not moved. Her eyes widened further in shock. She drew a deep breath.

In this situation, the only correct options were "fight" or "run." Choosing the option "speed dial my boss" was a sure way to get killed. Gaining his feet in a fluid motion, Malakh called on the pacts of faith he had made, digging more deeply than ever before. In the barrio, Cesar Delgado clutched at his chest; in other buildings, sleepers woke screaming. Seething upward from the ground in a blur of mutating flesh and fur, Malakh dragged the woman down from the crate with his remaining forelimb as she clutched at her phone, forcing the splintered edge of the crate through her spine and pushing the air wordlessly from her lungs.

Malakh dropped her body and spun to face his two opponents, his wings unfurled to balance his awkward three-point stance. Both wore their demonic shapes now. One sharpened his claws on the blood-smeared concrete with obvious relish. Malakh showed his teeth in pleasure. He had thought that these two would prefer a fight to standing guard over a chained foe. He stopped his bleeding with a short burst of energy. Years ago he could have grown a new limb with trivial ease, but now he was not sure he could, or that he had the strength to spare for it. He would fight them one-armed.

They moved in unison, exchanging some unseen attack signal. Malakh slipped left at the last second, breaking one foe's charge with a stunning slap of his wings. The unimpeded attacker turned and reared up to slash at his side. He came down on Malakh's forward-swept wing and came away with feathers and blood. Malakh spun between them and away as the first enemy regained his senses, but his wing now hung askew.

Panting, they regarded each other across the open space. In the next instant, they were all pressed to the floor by a concussive wave. It was light, made hard and clear like a rain of diamonds. It was the crushing, invisible blast of a clarion calling the champions to battle. It filled Malakh with a fierce joy, and with the confidence of a child who would pick up an asp if his father said that no harm would come. Lucifer had come.

The demons in front of him were pressed to the floor with terror—they had been hunting the Lightbearer but had not truly remembered what that meant until now. Their eyes rolled around their heads, their mouths working and foaming like dogs that had eaten tainted meat.

Malakh bounded back into the fray, his spirit renewed. While his enemies cowered, he sprang with a roar, knocking one of them back onto the floor. His back claws dug into soft underbelly and he raked downward, spilling intestines and offal to the floor. The other guard was roused from his stupor by the death throes of his companion. He clawed at Malakh's unprotected right side then threw himself up into the air as Malakh's teeth grazed his shoulder.

The demon landed heavily on the catwalk above. Malakh paused, tasting the flecks of blood on the fur of his muzzle. "I know you," he rasped. "Thumiel."

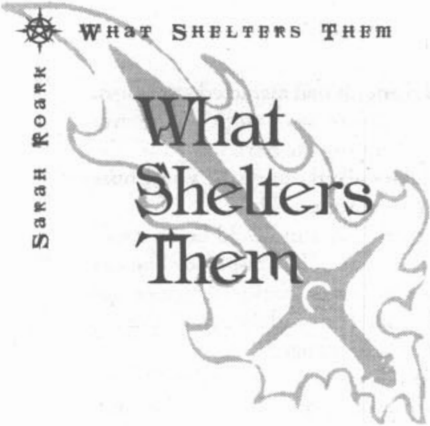
Thumiel nodded. The catwalk swayed under his weight. "Another time, Malakh," he whispered. He took off ponderously and crashed out of the warehouse through an aluminum grate at the roof's point.

Malakh padded over to the chain that still held a human arm. He stomped on the hand repeatedly until he could force the chain's cuff over what remained. He would leave as little of himself here for them to study, or gnaw, as he could. The remarkable chain was smeared with blood and shreds of flesh hung on many of its links, but it was still whole and intact. Malakh could only imagine Jarod carefully scrubbing the clotted blood out of each little sigil with a toothbrush. The chain would have to stay. Malakh had little use for it anyway.

Whatever Lucifer had done, it had attracted attention. The streets outside the warehouse were empty. Whatever trap they had laid for the Morningstar here was gone, the preparations useless. Malakh walked out of the warehouse in Alejandro's human shape, unopposed.

Halfway home, he stopped. The sun would be up soon. Malakh could smell the dew. "Lucifer," he whispered. The very name was a prayer. There was no answer, but the silence was not dead. It was patient. He continued on, and the sun rose over a world and a man both irrevocably changed.

Even on the rioting and lawless streets of the city, no one messed with the man walking grimly toward home, carrying his own arm.



What Shelters Them

Sarah Roark

Blame it on Agent Orange. Sam Ashbury could sleep like a rock through just about anything, caught in these nightmares that seemed to last for weeks on end, nightmares where soldiers kept turning into animals and the ground opened up and swallowed whole units. The sky would take on different colors depending on who was about to die.

It's a very personal Vietnam, I'll give it that. It has its own natural laws that stay the same from dream to dream, so I keep thinking I almost have a handle on it. Which just makes it worse. Ashbury probably feels the same, seeing as he's caught up in the dreams twenty-four/seven. Maybe I'll ask him the next time I'm dreaming about being napalmed by our own flyboys. That's where ol' Sam went to when he got so worn out that he let an honest-to-Grandma demon from H-E-double-hockey-sticks like me kick him out of his own body and take it over.

I got the dreams along with the body. Most of Ashbury's memories, too, and his affection for steamed franks with extra relish. So pretty much every night I get to suffer side-by-side with the poor soul I damned to eternal flashbacks for the only offense of not being able to handle a world that had treated him like shit. Some people would call that a pretty workable definition of Hell, I guess. Trust me, I been there, and they've got no idea.

I guess I'm trying to explain why I don't wake up when it happens. I'm not sure why I need to explain this. It must be the old shepherd's instinct. Back when I had the forgeworks, I always knew the instant anyone got hurt. But then I never had to sleep either.

Anyway, for whatever reason, I don't wake up until there's a hand on my elbow. I open my eyes and know immediately that I'm in the real world because there aren't any little black girls in Da Nang.

"Sir," she says. She has to be from the South, "sir" rolls off her tongue so easily. She doesn't say anything else, though, just looks behind her. I drag myself up to sitting, and the first thing I notice is that most of the people that were camping here last night have already gone, nothing left of them but the junk-food wrappers. The sky's starting to lighten, but it's still dark under the overpass and the concrete where my hand comes down is chilly.

The girl's brother sits across from me, chafing their mother's hand. The woman is curled up. A little string of spit connects her lip to the pavement. I don't need to get any closer, I already know. The girl knows it too. She's ten, maybe eleven, more than old enough for a street kid to understand what dead is.

The girl turns back to me.

"Mama's hands get cold a lot," she says. "She tell Alexander to rub 'em. 'Rub real fast! Faster! Ooh, you settin' it on fire!' Like that." She smiles briefly, already filing the memory away somewhere safe.

Alexander looks at me too now, tear tracks streaking down his cheeks. He's younger than his sister. Maybe he really doesn't understand. But I think he does. I think he just wants to keep busy.

After a long sleepy second I realize the girl is asking me to do it. She must have asked all the others first. I can just picture it: They don't even bother to shake their heads as they gather up their blankets and their taped-up sleeping bags. Sorry, little girl. Got things to do, lines to stand in, people to panhandle, coffee to drink, booze to buy. No time to make a 911 call.

How quickly things change. Right after the quake you'd see all this news footage, huge crowds of people living under freeways and in tent cities built with federal disaster money. Heartwarming stories about how folks pull together when they're all in the same bad fix. And I don't doubt it was really like that, for a little while. The aid still pours in from the rest of the country, but here in LA, it's finally hitting them just how long things are going to take. Just how long all these people are going to be on their own. And even the newbies have learned by now they can't always trust the cops.

Little brother doesn't want to leave mama's side, not even to walk to a pay phone. I point it out to the girl: See, there's one right there across the street, at the Zipmart. She and I cross the streets to get to it. She starts to walk against the light. My hand comes down instinctively and clamps on her shoulder. She looks up at me with this funny expression. Now I've really done it. I've screwed up.

The cops are decent, especially when they get a look at my veteran ID. One even buys me coffee. The EMTs make asses of themselves for nothing—it's not like they have any excuse to be irritable since all they're really doing is cleanup. The kids won't let go of my hands. The cops have to pry them off. Somebody gives Alexander a mangy old Care Bear. Good thing toys don't have to breathe, the way he's squeezing it. Monique—Monique LaMotte, I overhear her spelling it—answers questions calmly, patiently. They get bundled into the cop car. Her eyes are on me as they pull away.

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Child Welfare Services won't tell me anything over the phone the next day, so I run my clothes through the Baptist mission's washer and dryer and take a bus down there. They wouldn't tell me anything in person either, but it just so happens their wiring's been on the fritz ever since the quake. The power keeps going out and taking the computer network with it, which means cases don't get processed, and there's a hell of a lot more of those than usual. The generator they were supposed to be getting in last week still hasn't shown up. So I tell them I used to be in the union. A lie, but it's easier than explaining that I helped design the structure of molecules, so alternating current really isn't all that mystifying.

Anyway, they're so happy not to be working by fluorescent lantern anymore that I finally get the story. No, Monique and Alexander didn't get sent to McLaren's. McLaren's is already at twice capacity, so the caseworkers didn't even bother asking. They just let the kids sleep on a desk there at the office till somebody found spots for them at a group home—which also technically doesn't have room, but then neither does anyplace else.

No, of course they can't tell me where the group home is. But they can leave the paperwork out on top of this desk while everyone gets a long-overdue cup of coffee.

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The group home's in Venice. I try to decipher the gang graffiti. The lettering style is Puerto Rican, but past that I'm at a loss. At least I don't see a lot of condemned signs, so maybe this street wasn't hit too hard. I think it's been run down for a long time.

The house stands out because it's one of the few with any fresh paint on it. I hear children's voices shrieking, and my blood freezes for a second before I realize it's just roughhousing. I glance at the windows then walk around the side of the house to check out the backyard. There's a foursome of preteens throwing a Frisbee around, a few younger kids wrestling on the jungle gym, and Monique's sitting on a swing with Alexander and a couple of little girls gathered at her feet. She's deep into an account of *something* or other—her arms are wheeling around and she's pulling all these different faces.

Her audience is rapt. I'm just about to take off with a clear conscience when the Frisbee four break off their game and come over to the swing set.

And your classic playground hassle starts up. "Ooh, the "*secret* stories," one of the older kids calls in a high, fluty voice. "The secret *fairy* tales!"

One of the girls shoots something back. The little punk's just delighted to have his bait taken. "Look!" He goes up on tiptoe and arches his arms over his head. "I'm the Blue Lady!"

"Shit, with those Nikes, you gotta be a demon," his friend laughs back. Monique springs up and runs in the house. The other little kids scatter, deserting Alexander. That's when he looks up and sees me.

I grin like there's nothing at all wrong with an old bum skulking around a kids' home and motion him over. He joins me.

I assume we don't have a lot of time. I huddle with him against the wall there.

"You and Monique doing okay?"

He nods.

"Food all right? No roaches? Are the counselors nice?"

He nods again, but I don't think any of that's even registered yet. It matters a lot more that his sister gets laughed at.

"My name is Sam. I just wanted to check up on you." Can't I do better than that? "I... wish I knew a better place for you. If I did, I'd take you myself. But I don't even have a place for me. You know what that's like."

I bet he hasn't cried since it happened. He just says "Yeah."

"So you believe in the Blue Lady too?"

This is a big risk. See, I'm not supposed to know about the secret stories—no grownup is. And I'm not even really clear on the Blue Lady. I've just heard her mentioned in reverent whispers from Miami to Phoenix. Standing around waiting for a shelter ticket, eating lukewarm soup... if you're paying attention, you realize the kids have these stories. They shut up fast when they see somebody looking, though.

The look he gives me is hurt, guarded. "*You* know about the Blue Lady?"

"Always have. Even I was young once." Nine below know I have *some* idea how humans build their legends, so I take another leap. "And I know she's always listening. You can't give up on her. No matter what some gangbanger wannabe tells you."

"Angels is real," he says hesitantly. Seven years old and he can't take even that for granted. But he needs to believe, no question.

"Angels are real," I agree. A traitorous little shiver goes down Ashbury's spine. No. This is not my prayer to answer. Let it struggle up to the heavenly host, if it can.

On the other hand, what if? Who else *would* see the angels, whatever angels might be left? Or maybe at least the fallen ones. It's an easy enough mistake to make nowadays, isn't it?

"In the shelters, they always listen to Monique. She know every—she know—a *hundred and sixty-seven* stories, plus ten more. She say they just for girls." Alexander searches my face to see if I comprehend. I do. "We counted 'em once when Mama was gone all night and we had to stay up. She learn some from Delvin in Baton Rouge, and some from Marisa in Corpus Christi. The oldest most secret stories."

Alexander picks at the ragged edge of his sleeve. "But they won't listen here. Not if the big kids be gafflin'"'em for it... "

"I'd listen."

"She won't tell you." He seems rueful, though. "She don't tell grownups."

"Even a grownup who believes?" I ask softly.

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This story come from Marisa, who say it happened a long time ago in Brownsville. There was a boy named Rafael and his family and they can't find a place to stay the night, so they go to the beach and lie down on the cold sand. Well, in the middle of a night a big storm come in. Rafael look up into the sky and he can see the Blue Lady and the Devil fighting—when he hit her the lightning flash, and when she hit him back the thunder go bang! Now the Devil's skin be sparkling like a gold and silver snake, and the Blue Lady *knock off a piece of it, and it fall to the ground and turn into a shiny new quarter. Then the Devil grab the Blue Lady's wing and pull on it, and one of the feathers come off and fall to the ground and turn into a palm leaf. See, back when God first made the angels and the demons they didn't have no bodies, but when they come to earth they put bodies together out of this and that.*

Rafael run over to pick up the quarter and the palm leaf. He yell up to the Devil "Look here! I'm throwing a piece of you in the ocean, you better go get it!" And he throw it in the water. Well, the Devil go diving in after it, and he was so heavy he sink all the way to the very bottom of the ocean. And the Blue Lady come down to Rafael and say "Thank you." He try to give her back the palm leaf then, but she say, "You keep it with you. That way I can always find you, even if you die." So from then on all the children know that if you love someone and put a palm leaf on they grave, the Blue Lady can always find them and take them to the angels.

"That's quite a story," I say. Monique smiles at me. I think about it. Gold and silver scales, not exactly, but in its prime, gold and silver motes seemed always to dance around the Morningstar, swirling in the tides of its energy, trailing after it like a coronation cloak. It's possible.

"Raquel say you can hear the Blue Lady's real name if you put a seashell to your ear and listen hard," Alexander volunteers.

"If you know her real name and you shout it out, then not even bullets can hurt you."

"Did Raquel say anything else about the Devil?"

"Bloody Mary his girlfriend."

"Is she now?"

"Uh-uh," Monique says disgustedly.

"Even the Devil can't look at Bloody Mary's face."

"But how come Rafael's family didn't see the Devil and the Blue Lady?" I ask.

Monique scrunches her face up and considers. "I think sometimes something wrong with people eyes."

"Whose—grownups?"

"Yeah, grownups. Maybe even some kids. Mama used to leave us at story time at the library so she can go panhandle. When she come back she say "'How many eyes I got?' I say two. She say 'How many ears?' I say two. Then she hold up her fingers and ask me how many, so I tell her and she say, 'Good. Then I ain't invisible.'"

I nod. It was an exercise in spiritual erosion just getting together $8.70 to pay for their banana splits here, so I'm not about to argue.

"You the only grownup I ever know who believe the stories. I don't mean the Bible stories. A lot of grownups believe those."

"But those were a long time ago."

"Yeah. Like when the angels came to Lot to tell him about Sodom and Gomorrah getting burnt, they believe that story. But if angels don't die... don't they still got to be around?"

"Makes sense to me. Look at that, it's late. You'll miss curfew." I walk them back down the seven or eight blocks between the ice cream place and the group home. Monique's hand is wrapped around three of my fingers. They tell me goodnight and skip up the steps. I head for the bus stop at the end of the block, wondering if any shelter tickets are left. Probably not at this point.

A sputter of automatic gunfire erupts somewhere behind me, followed by the snarl of a revving engine. A car-shaped blur whips past.

Ashbury's damn hair-trigger adrenaline kicks in, making my heart thud and my head go light. For a second I think I might actually faint. But I force myself to turn around and stagger back up the street. There's a kid here on the sidewalk in a blood-drenched sports jersey and jogging pants. He's rolling, trying to get up. His arm flails at me. I dodge it. *They shot him right in front of the group home,* I'm thinking. *Right in front.* Somebody's screaming inside. A ghost-white young face appears in the window. I fling the front door open and charge right in—thank God it's unlocked—yelling the kids' names.

I bang through a couple hall doors before I find the room where they're all gathering to huddle, down below the level of the windowsills. The counselor who's dragged the phone down to the floor to call 911 blinks up at me.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Where's Monique and Alexander?" I shoot back. Just then another counselor hurries in with Alexander in her arms and Monique alongside.

The phone in the first counselor's hand squawks and she jabbers into it. "I don't know. Police, ambulance, I don't know. Somebody's shooting out there."

"Tell them there's a boy down in front of the house," I tell her.

"There's a boy down. No, I don't know the name, I just—*sit your black asses down*!" she screams at two of the older kids.

"Come on, get down," I whisper to Monique. The counselor holding Alexander snuggles against the wall. She spreads her hand over his head like that would stop a stray bullet. Monique slides over to my lap and parks herself. The counselor stares at me. Of course. Nobody can ever think of a decent reason for a middle-aged man to care about a little girl who plainly isn't his daughter. But now doesn't exactly seem the time to explain.

I start humming a tune. I have no idea what it is, it's just something Ashbury knew. Monique is spring-wound in my arms. The 911 operator finally gets the counselor to stop panicking and give an address.

The humming is for me too. I'm doing my best to be calm for the kids. I don't want to get angry yet. Not this angry. Not here.

◆ ◆ ◆

It's so easy. Maybe that's what's been wrong with me all along. Metals, salts, acids, ions: the things of earth are still supple and obedient under my fingers. They don't know they're not supposed to be. They don't have wills, only properties—some obvious and some hidden to all but the eyes of the angels that formed them, but anyone could master them completely with time. Not all Creation is so well behaved. I had no idea. I thought I could shape the humans too, structure them just like the molecules in a crystal. Or, at least, I saw no reason why one such as the Morningstar should have any trouble with it.

There were bullet holes in the kids' headboards. Bullet holes. This is honestly the best the city can do for them. Theoretically they're lucky—other kids are sleeping in dumpsters so they'll stink too bad to get raped.

Something wrong with people eyes. No shit, Monique. No shit.

I need to keep the device small, small enough to go in a little girl's pocket or around her neck. Twisted paper clips and piano wire actually do pretty well for the cage, a crude but effective celestial replica dotted with tiny slivers of refrigerator magnet to help draw in and contain the energies. But the components for the core take me all day to gather. I'm forced to scrap my first and better idea and jury-rig it with something that only really works in Renaissance gemology. So I find an occult bookstore and rip a relevant paragraph out of Agrippa, wrapping it carefully around the offending anachronism as insulation.

"Never heard of no angel Sephidor," Monique frowns when I bring it to her. "You sure he in the secret stories?"

"He's in some of the most secret stories there are. His name is one of the forty-four hundred carved on the Earth's cornerstone." It's thrilling that I can say these things to her simply because she's a child. Some days I think I could just as easily be a figment of poor Ashbury's nightmares, and no one including me would know the difference. "This charm has his breath in it. If you wear it, it'll protect you from harm. And if you hold someone's hand, then it'll protect that someone too."

She looks at it, spinning on the velvet ribbon I've strung it on, glinting dimly under the streetlight. It doesn't look like much right now. "Where you get it?" she wants to know.

And that's the end of my truth-telling. "My sister gave it to me, long ago," I answer. "Take it."

She touches it, takes it into her hand, jouncing it around a bit because it's been chilled in the evening air. But almost right away it warms in her palm. I fold her fingers over it.

"Do you believe in angels or not?" I prod her gently. "Do you still believe they're out there waiting to help, if you can just call their names?"

"I still believe it," she says, and her voice trembles a bit, but not with doubt.

"Then open your hand."

She does. A dull red glow, like light shining through a sheet of living muscle, leaps to life deep inside the device. I look up into her eyes. They've opened wide to catch the little bead of radiance, to mirror it. So little's left in her world that shines.

"There, see? Now put it on." I help her get it around her neck. "And remember the secret name... he's your guardian angel now."

"Sephidor," she says, not just correctly but beautifully. A flash of sorrow and pleasure courses through me: I am alive, I exist. I am an Annunaki, fallen artisan of Heaven, giver of wonderful and perilous gifts. Suddenly her arms circle my shoulders.

I've done it again. Why am I still so shocked that the Host won't show itself, that a demon should be the only one who seems to give a crap what happens? Maybe I think I'm proving something.

Or maybe it's this, just this, that I want.

So little left that shines...

* * *

It's not even a week before the device has to go off for the first time, while the kids are on a school field trip. Not that I know this at the time. Unless they say my name—and I don't mean "Sam"—I can't really know what's going on with them. But I get it from them later, after.

So this TV star, I don't know who exactly she plays but it's something involving PVC jumpsuits and assault rifles, decides to take the kids at Monique and Alexander's school on a tour of the soundstage for her show. There's a lot of this going on in LA right now. Celebrities without much to offer past their fame working that one asset just as hard as they can. Well, there they are on the soundstage with the star telling her funny stories and her handlers and agent kind of orbiting alongside and a huge crowd of kids squishing in as close as they can, and some knucklehead boy dares one of the older girls to climb a ladder somebody left up against a lighting tower. Then as she gets near the top he starts shaking it to try and scare her. Monique and another boy jump in and try to stop him. Within seconds there's utter commotion, security jabbering into walkie-talkies and teachers yelling at the class to get back. A few of the grownups rush over, but by that time it's too late. The ladder's wobbling, waving, falling with the girl still clinging to the top.

Monique, frozen in terror, feels a sudden flare of warmth on her chest and sees the ladder actually *slide forward* a little on its legs before it comes crashing down right on her.

Or rather, right around her. One rung just in front of her and the other just behind her. After a moment of dead silent shock she turns around. The other kid who tried to help is lying pinned beneath the ladder, an oozing scrape on his head. As for the girl on top of the ladder, the security guard' *tried* to catch her. She sits up, dazed. There's a patch of blood spreading through the fabric of her jeans, and a scary-looking lump underneath.

Monique feels the weight of eyes on her, staring. A blush rises in her cheeks. One stare in particular is heavier than the rest somehow—a man in a turtleneck, one of the starlet's handlers. He's youngish and good looking, and his face is a blank of surprise just like everyone else's, but somehow his surprise and just everything about him is more intense. Magnetic.

As she meets his gaze, she sees one corner of his mouth twitch with the beginning of a smile.

◆ ◆ ◆

"With the angels let us sing, alleluia to our King..."

The word *angels* catches me up like a short leash. It's stupid, but I stop. I'm being addressed.

The month's wearing on toward its end now; school's out. A sign over the tarp-covered stage says *Oasis Christian Church—Christmas Benefit for Earthquake Victims 6:30* *p.m.* They've got a section of the plaza blocked off. People are dropping money into the big plastic barrels in the audience area. It must be one of those new megachurches, or maybe one of the lefty new-agey ones, because the choir is such an eclectic bunch, all ages and colors. The only thing uniting them visually is their fresh-pressed blue robes. Their robes and their faces, all turned to the conductor. All smiling like the Christmas star's rising right in front of them. Like everything it promised is coming true right here on the street.

"Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly hosts sing alleluia..."

It's nothing—just a bunch of carolers. *I* was there at the very dawn, the first alleluia. I understand the meaning of the word. *They* do not. Cannot. Hot tears well up in Ashbury's eyes, spilling down the crevices in his cheeks. My vision blurs. But I want to cry out that all is'*not* well.

All has not been well for a very long time.

And they know it! Half their city lies in rubble. Satan himself appeared to them not two months ago. An even bigger Big One's still lurking there in the depths of the continental plate, ticking off the years. So how can they stand there and sing about how all is *well*?

How dare they, I think, and the void within me opens its maw.

Which angel was it anyway that first taught them? It was Nazriel, wasn't it, who explained about the divided string, the proportions of harmony and the modes of melody? Yeah, it's Nazriel's fault my tears are falling now. And yet I can feel such joy in their voices, such a—oh, I never speak the angel tongue anymore and this body doesn't have the words. I don't know how to say it. But I remember all over again how no punishment seemed too cruel to suffer for their sakes. I remember how it felt to bear up an innocent Creation on sure and gentle wings.

Oh, Maker! I remember what it was like to love them....

But come on. Am I going to let them do it to me again? Do they *really* believe everything some guy who died two thousand years ago on the other side of the world promised them? Or are they just too frightened to let themselves think of the alternative?

Or is it—this thought becomes the new axis that I turn on—is it something else, something about being human? Something that *makes* them human?

Yes. I think maybe it is. I think maybe that's why we fall so much further. How I pitied you once, children of clay. Pitied you your ignorance, your frailty. But see who is broken now. See who comes to you empty-handed and foolish, wanting nothing anymore but to learn.

Look to the One Above for your grace, then, since you can. I, I will look to you.

* * *

While I'm doing this, Monique and her brother have managed to get themselves lost. They go for sodas and make a wrong turn on the way back and don't realize it till they start seeing storefronts they don't recognize.

Alexander loses no time at all with the recriminations. "You got us lost. You said you knew the way. Girl, don't you ever watch where you going—"

Monique just grits her teeth. "Shut up. And don't let go my hand," she says to her brother.

"You can let me wear it, and *you* hold *my* hand," Alexander argues.

"No, I can't." She starts to clutch at it, then stops herself. "And you be quiet about it. Don't be talking about it, not here, not anywhere."

"You always talking about it!"

"Stop it, Alexander."

"Hey little girl, you and your brother lost?" A man at a pay phone says as they go by. "I've got a map in my car right over there."

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "No thank you, sir."

"Candy too. No? Oh now come on, I don't bite...." But he's already fumbling in his pocket, moving forward. A second later he's jumping back again as a motorcyclist roaring by them hits a slick spot in the road and wipes out sideways, skidding into Map Man and pinning him up against the pay phone. The kids stare for a second at the unmoving body wedged under the bike and Map Man crammed painfully into the phone carrel, then use the wits the Maker gave them and run until they're out of breath.

Panting, they look around again—still lost. "What if we miss curfew?" Alexander complains. "You getting us in trouble."

"You gonna let me think or not?" But in a way Monique feels better now. Her angel is watching out for them, obviously.

Alexander falls silent for a few minutes. Then all of a sudden he starts pulling at her.

"Hey, hey! Monique! Hey, Monique! Look, palm trees! Look!"

"Not now, Alexander." She glances over. They're passing a minipark, one of those ridiculous attempts to de-ghetto the ghetto by putting a speck of green in it, like it's contagious or something. But there are a couple palm trees, roughing it as best they can through the LA winter.

"But Monique, the palm leaf for Mama, to put on her grave! Come on, it won't hardly take a second!"

"Fine." She half pushes him up a tree so he can reach up toward the closest leaf.

"Monique." All of a sudden he's whispering. "Hey, lift me up some more! Something over there."

"Over where?"

"Look, look that way. See the light? Push me up higher."

"I can't push you up no higher." But she looks. Sure enough, there's a glow of some kind coming from deeper within the park, half-obscured by the bushes. It looks like sunlight through water, wavering patches of blue and white.

Alexander jumps down, even more excited now, and runs toward it. Monique follows. Battling instincts cancel out. She shouldn't be going anywhere but home. She especially shouldn't be chasing mysteries at this hour. On the other hand, it's such a beautiful light, and colored light too. Colored light is a good thing—the secret stories say it attracts angels because that's what they like to eat.

(Actually I confess a preference for hot dogs, but that's definitely Ashbury's fault. Anyway I'm fallen, so I don't guess I count.)

They come around the bush and there, standing under the tree, is a woman. Or actually she's not so much standing as floating a couple inches off the ground. She's got dark hair and shimmering blue skin, which is what's throwing off that pearly radiance. Her arms are out in a sort of Jesus posture with the palms upturned, as if to welcome and bless them all at once. She's draped in folds and folds of what looks like the finest bridal lace, except it's all blue, and it and her hair are floating slowly around like she's underwater. She's got wings almost as big as she is, spangled with little beads of moisture that catch the light and sparkle. By all rights she should be a ghostly vision, but she's not. She's absolutely solid, visible and touchable. She's as real as the lamppost nearby, and brighter.

Of course the kids stand there dumbstruck. The woman leans forward and kisses them each on the forehead. Now what you have to understand is first of all, nobody has kissed these kids since their mother died. The counselors are there to see that they brush their teeth, stay off drugs, do their homework, and don't hog the hot water. Kissing is not in the job description, and besides, they're too scared of lawsuits.

But it's more than that. She smells nice. Her smile is gentle, and the kisses she plants sends warmth all through them so they feel like—this is exactly how Monique puts it—like they've walked into a room where a fire is going and a Christmas tree is all lit with presents mounded up underneath and turkey's roasting somewhere. Just the way you always see it on TV. Her wings curve forward, arching around them as though to shelter them.

Monique knows thirty-one legends of the Blue Lady. They don't always agree, but there are certain things that stay the same from story to story. They all talk about the blue skin, the dark hair, the sweetness of her face, the wings. Most of all, they talk about how good it feels to be near her. How like a waking dream.

"I need your help," she says to them, and the voice is so kind and musical that Alexander starts to cry. "A great darkness is on the city. If no one stops it, many children will suffer."

She stretches out her arms to them, and they step in. A moment later they're up and out, bursting free of the thickest layer of pollution. Shabby, dirty buildings become dark blocks adorned in twinkling light, the skyline rolls into sight and a cold breeze stings their cheeks and ears, waking up their senses. The Blue Lady's wings spread wide and beat powerfully against the air. For the first time Monique looks at Los Angeles and finds it beautiful. She's above it all for once. It's so much easier to feel benevolent from above.

And they're flying, joyously. I don't think it ever occurs to either of them to doubt her strength, to wonder where they're headed or into what danger. This is a dream come true. How often does that happen? Why ruin it?

The Blue Lady draws them closer. Regardless of whatever great darkness she was talking about, she doesn't seem to be going anywhere in particular. She swoops through clouds and over water. Then after a while she alights in a big comfortable oak tree in a garden somewhere. By that time they're feeling a little drowsy, exhausted from the thrill of soaring, warm and safe in the arms of this amazing being. The breeze waves the branches of the tree back and forth, and the soft rustling of the leaves is a lullaby all on its own.

They both drop off into the most peaceful sleep they've known in years.

* * *

Alexander wakes up and lies real still. At first he lies real still because he's in the most wonderful bed he's ever slept in and he wants to drift off again. But there's voices coming from the next room. One of them is definitely male and pleasant, rising and falling musically; the other one, though, would wake anybody out of a sound sleep. It sounds kind of like someone taught a dozen rats to talk in chorus.

"Young Monique would seem to be the one bound to it, yes," says the male voice as Alexander creeps up beside the barely open door to listen. "But unless I'm mistaken, it also protects whoever holds her hand, and that, my lord, is the truly interesting facet of its design."

"Explain," says the other voice.

"Well, my lord, one must wonder exactly what would happen if the one holding her hand was also the one trying to hurt her."

"If the charm works the way they always used to, the energy would still be reflected somewhere. A bystander perhaps. *Someone* must pay."

"Yes, my lord. But then supposing there are no bystanders?"

An unidentifiable rumble.

"I begin to see what you mean."

"It has nowhere to go. The device is already protecting everyone within its reach."

"Yes, I see. Your theory is that it would simply build up until the device could no longer contain it...."

"Exactly. A veritable explosion of bad karma. Together with the usual rites, it should be enough to make at least a small rip."

"I'm getting tired of *small* rips, Nineresh."

"I'm estimating conservatively, my lord. But even so—surely there are still many lesser colleagues you would rejoice to see freed back into the world?"

"Of course. And it's an intriguing idea in any case, turning the Annunaki's creation against itself. Proceed, then. I always said that there was more to you than a pretty face."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Now, speaking of the usual rites...?"

"The preparations are underway, my lord. As for supplies, remember I also have her little brother."

Alexander peeks around the side of the door, then quickly jerks back. What he sees in that half-second scars his memory forever.

"Good. Then I'll have Ubbuk assemble the list of the chosen and deliver it to you as quickly as possible. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm trying to get the Oscar campaign into swing here..."

"Yes, my lord."

Suddenly the door swings the rest of the way open. Alexander gets folded behind it. A man walks through and heads over to the computer at the end of the room. Alexander realizes he has a terrible choice to make. He can slip back into bed with Monique and hope they get an opportunity to escape together—and something about that conversation didn't make that sound very likely. Or he can sneak out *now*, while the man's staring at the screen, and try to get some help.

With a last desperate glance at his sister's sleeping face, he decides.

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At first I think I'm mishearing. I'm listening to this crisis-line woman explain about how the severe weather shelters work (in LA... honest!) and thinking that if it's in the Episcopal cathedral tonight that may not be such a good thing anyway, and right in the middle of it all she says "Sephidor."

My throat goes dry. "Excuse me?"

"I said you'll need picture ID. Did you get what I said before that?" They don't like getting called from pay phones on busy streets. Not much I can do about that of course.

"Yeah, but did you... " For a second I'm sure this is something left over from Ashbury, some post-traumatic thing. But then I hear it again and this time it's more focused. It's not the crisis-line woman. It's coming from somewhere in the distance.

Somebody's saying my name.

Monique's the only person I've told my true name to in two years. That doesn't mean it's her. There are others who know my name, most of whom I never want to run into. I hang up the phone and turn in the direction of the call, attuning my being toward it. As I concentrate, more detail comes to me. Young. A little boy, running... he's terrified... he's praying. He's asking for the angel Sephidor's protection. He has a name of his own.

Alexander.

Unfortunately this doesn't work both ways. Mortals don't hear these sorts of invocations, they're just good at making them. I take off at a jog, picking my way through the streets—none of them is taking me exactly where I want, so I cheat a little on the laws of physics. I don't think too many people will really notice if this avenue runs north-northeast instead of north for just a couple minutes, or at least they'll just think it's their own fault for getting lost.

As it happens, I almost run right past him. He comes streaking out of an alleyway behind me, but I hear the pounding footsteps, turn around and catch him.

"Alexander!"

He yells as I snag his elbow, but then he recognizes me and bursts into tears. I bend down in front of him and grab his shoulders.

"What's going on, Alexander? Where's your sister?"

He twists away. "No! Lemme go! There's the car!"

"What car?"

A pair of headlights appears at the end of the block and he strains, trying to pull me back into the alleyway. I let him do it, dropping down behind a dumpster with him. A sleek sedan cruises slowly past us with the window down and a frowning man craning his head out of it. I don't know if we were spotted, but plainly that's the object here.

"Come on." I propel him back through the alley and start tracing a maze. The last thing they'll expect a little kid to do is double back toward danger, so I lead us back the way he came for a bit and then head off in another direction.

"They can smell me," he whimpers. Now that he says that, it strikes me that the man *did* look like he was sniffing. His nostrils were working anyway.

Sick dread comes over me. Most of the time I'm confined to Ashbury's instincts and intuitions, but even this soft flesh can't totally mute things out. I know the touch, the smell of the void and those that serve it. How could I not? So right away I have a premonition. I just need to find out exactly who, and exactly why. First, though, I need to lose our pursuer.

I swing Alexander up into Ashbury's strong arms.

* * *

About this time, Monique's waking up to realize Alexander's not with her anymore. She sits up and for the first time, because the Blue Lady's not there anymore either, she really notices where she is, which is a big condo done in what I later gather to be some kind of Asian-flavored ultramodern, red-lacquered wood, black glass and moody track lighting kind of style. Not exactly the kind of place you would expect to find angels, in other words. She heaves herself out of the waterbed and pads in her sock feet across the vast bedroom rug. There's a humming sound coming from the door across from her, a sound she's heard before, although it's been a few years.

She peeks in. There's a man standing there in the bathroom in front of a wall-size mirror running an electric razor over his jaw line. He's just wearing slacks. He checks out his perfect skin under the makeup lights.

It's the man she saw a couple weeks before, the one that was staring at her on the soundstage.

"Have a good nap, Monique?" he asks her. She just shakes her head.

"You... you're a man," she says.

He turns to her and gives her this blazing Sunset Boulevard smile, a smile for a forty-foot screen all trained on one little girl.

"Do you like that better?"

"Where the Blue Lady go?" she asks, even though she knows.

"I could be the Blue Lady for you again, if that'll make it easier. Your... friends at the home say you're quite devoted to her." He passes his hand along her jaw as he walks by. The smell of cologne wafts up from his skin, cool and crisp as moonlight. "But perhaps you're getting tired of your stories at last... maybe there's a new one you'd like to hear. That's why the children's stories are secret, *isn't it*?" He goes over to the closet, takes out one of those super-soft boutique sweaters and puts it on. "Revenge for all the secrets the grownups keep from you?"

"No. That's not it," she says. Luckily she's still a bit too young to really get the full appeal of one of these creatures, but all the same there's that smell of moonlight, that sense of an unspoken promise, and it's hard to think of a good comeback.

"But you do agree that fair is fair, right? Monique, the system is trading you around like a bad nickel. You already know that the only way out is to grow up. You'll still be poor—" he frowns as he contemplates his row of semicasual shoes. "But at least you won't be anyone's property anymore."

"I don't need your help to grow up," she tells him. Her voice isn't as strong as she'd like it to be. It's thin, high—childish—and it gets swallowed up in the dark corners of the room. Her eyes burn with the start of tears.

"Of course not," he agrees. "We all grow up sometime."

"You can't hurt me."

"Yes, I know."

She retreats over to the bedstead by the other door. "I have a gua—"

"A guardian angel? Shh. Better not say the name unless you want me to be able to use it."

"Where my brother?"

"I have no idea. He has departed unannounced." A sparking glance. "Which means that another child will have to be brought into this, and that our timeframe has become, shall we say, rather more compressed."

She watches him. She wants to run but she's never seen anyone move like him, so odd and fluid. He comes over to her.

"What are you really?" she asks him.

"Look and see." He holds out his hand to her, palm upturned. She doesn't understand at first, but something catches her eye and she moves closer to look. Something's wrong with the lines of his palm. There's way too many of them, and they whorl and bend in strange directions. As she keeps looking, it almost starts to seem like there's a pattern to it, something she could read if she just knew the code.

Without even realizing it she reaches out to touch a line, to follow it to its end. She looks up, startled, to a sudden tearing sound, and as her head jerks up she feels the creature's hand clamp down immovably over her own.

* * *

"We gotta hurry," Alexander nags me. He clutches at my sleeve. I think the poor kid's disoriented. I don't blame him: I can hear four different buskers playing four different kinds of music—loud and mostly bad—and the blaze of storefront lights is blinding. Still, I think I'll have to come back to the Promenade again when this is all over. I bet there's good panhandling here if you don't mind getting chased off by bicycle cops.

"I know," I tell him. "But we can't go until I've found you something to take along. I'll fight this—I don't guess it ever said its real name?"

"No, but I heard—"

"Well, don't say it yet. We'll see if you can write it. Anyway, I'll fight this creature if I have to, but what are you going to do? Now you said you don't think a cross keeps evil away."

"Mama had a gold cross and bad things happen to her all the time. When she went to sell it she say it never help nobody anyway."

"Right. Like you say. So it's got to be something else."

"Like what?"

"Well, I had one thought... " I stop and squint through the artificial glare, agitated. "But I'm not seeing it. Holler if you see anything that looks like beach souvenirs."

"Like towels with stuff on it?" He squints around too.

"No... more like seashells."

"I've got sand dollars," comes a papery voice at the level of my waist.

Startled, I step away and look. The cardboard sign says *NOT a veteran, NOT a father, NOT seeking work, JUST an Honest Disciple of JESUS, God Bless.* The bearded man smiles up at us. I see pewter silver crosses and Stars of David on beaded leather thongs—a little spasm of unease shudders through my stomach—and hemp bracelets with *WWJD* woven into the pattern. He hands Alexander a plastic bag with a white sand dollar inside, along with a blue slip of typewritten paper. Alexander frowns at the words.

"The Leg—"

"Legend of the Sand Dollar," the man finishes. "Ever heard the story?"

"I know it," I say. Then I put a hand on Alexander's shoulder. "This is perfect. I'll explain on the bus. Uh... lessee." I feel my cheek coloring. Actually, if I pay for this I won't *have* bus fare, and we sure as hell don't have time to walk...

"Take it," the man says. "I believe I'm doing my Christlike deed for the night."

◆ ◆ ◆

Alexander got the name of the building too, so I can look it up in the phone book, which is good because he'd never have remembered the way back. It's one of those chi-chi condo developments you can't just walk into. We hide by the entrance to the parking garage and wait for a car to come along. It turns out to be a van instead. As soon as it pulls in, a guy in a suit leaps out the side door holding a suspiciously lumpy garbage bag in his arms, with his 9mm laid up against the side of it. The security cameras wouldn't have picked out that little detail, but I sure do.

Maybe the Maker *is* still tinkering here and there. I get to kill two birds with one stone. The van's driver sinks a bullet into me before I manage to put him and his bag-carrying buddy out of commission. Maybe people will think it's a car backfiring, maybe not. I'd rather cops came, anyway. Anything to slow this Nineresh down. I tear the bag off the poor shaking kid inside and set him loose, telling him to go get help.

The suit's cardkey gets us in to the elevator. "You said he was up on top?"

"Yeah, up on very top."

Good thing we have the *right* cardkey, I bet the elevator won't even go up to the top floor without it.

"Get ready, Alexander." I check the 9mm. It's got a fresh magazine. The wound in my thigh pulls at me, throbbing. Ashbury's gotten shot before and been okay. That memory keeps me from panicking, though I definitely feel lightheaded. My blood dribbles onto the nice carpet. I concentrate for a second and the bullet pops out into my hand and the hole closes, too late to do anything about the mess, though. It's always possible somebody could invoke and bind me with a spatter of Ashbury's blood. Oh well.

We can't find anybody in the designer murk of the condo itself, but I can *feel* that one of my kind is here somewhere. Luckily I finally think to open the big curtains that take up one end of the living room. There's a whole patio out there with a minigarden and a swimming pool. I see a man leaning over the pool, his arm half-submerged in it. He's grinning. The water around his elbow churns.

"Monique!" I throw the sliding glass door open.

The man looks at me, grins even wider, and lifts his arm. Monique comes up with it, flailing, screaming, spitting up lungfuls of water. He's got her hand *taped* to his with electrical tape.

She won't die no matter how long he's been holding her down in there. The reasonable part of me knows that. But she can certainly be'*terrified*. She can certainly suffer the spiritual agony of drowning. My device can't do anything about that.

"Stay back, Alexander." I put my hand on the boy's chest, restraining him. "You don't want to get near the charm right now." I think he knows that, though. Even the dimmest human stepping out onto this patio could feel the terrible charge in the air. All my hair feels like it's standing apart.

The man—the creature, rather, Nineresh—sets Monique down on her feet poolside, or tries to. Her knees buckle under her.

"So you are right here in town," it says to me. "I shouldn't be surprised. So many of us are in LA these days."

"I know what you're doing—Nineresh." My voice comes out husky, half-breaking.

"Of course you do. You know your own work. Whether you actually gave much thought to its vulnerabilities before tonight, I'm curious on that point, but it hardly matters. Look, we needn't become enemies over this. My lord is, for all purposes, master of this city… "

I snort. It ignores me.

"You can be recompensed for losing the device—and its thrall. I assure you, there's plenty to go around for those who serve. And even those who simply agree not to interfere." Well, it's not trying to overwhelm me with glamour, at least. It's just laying out a nice logical proposal. If I really were collecting thralls, I'd accept in a beat of Alexander's fluttering heart.

"I'm afraid you really don't understand the problem here," I say.

"No, I'm afraid *you* don't, my nameless colleague," Nineresh answers, and as if to prove it right, Monique picks that second to shoot a really well-aimed kick at it. It should have been a kneecapper, but instead it somehow just kind of glances and slides off. Nineresh laughs. I hear a cracking sound beside me—the potted plant by the door is suddenly listing to port and turning black, and the pot itself has split into several pieces, dirt spilling out from in between. Looking around I notice a lot of the concrete paving around the pool is cracked too. I doubt Nineresh had it built that way.

"She's been fighting me the whole time, I'm afraid." Nineresh lifts her back up to her feet. She braces her feet against him and pulls. "It's really helped speed things along. Face it. As long as we're connected, there's nothing even you can do."

Which is absolutely true, I realize. There's no way to end this as long as she believes.

"Sweetheart," I call out. "Monique. Look at me. Look at me now." And I summon my strength, pushing my essence out through Ashbury's pores, swallowing and melting the clay of human flesh for just a moment so that I can show her what her Sephidor has come to. The millennia have not been kind. My skin, once the brilliant black of iron ore, has dulled to ash gray. The brilliant sparks that once flashed through my eyes and mouth whenever I opened them are long since put out. I'm sure I look older, even though it was only Adam's get that the Maker cursed with age. My face is lined from years of frowning, questioning, shouting, raging, all things angels were never really built to do.

Nineresh frankly stares at me, the mouth of its host body agape. The expression is horrible. The Lammasu have never loved what isn't beautiful, and I am reminding it of things it would doubtless rather ignore. I bet it hasn't worn its own true face since it left the Pit.

"I made the device. I *was* an angel," I tell Monique. "Once, but no more. I fell a long time ago."

She blinks painfully, a web of tears spreading down her face. I'm killing something in her, killing the one thing that was keeping her going. *Maker, is this necessary? Why must I be the assassin? I love her. I'm one of exactly two people who do!*

"Even so I wanted to help you, but Monique, God didn't send me to do that. I don't even know where God is. I don't know where your mother is or why she had to be taken away. I don't know why anything is like it is, and it doesn't seem anyone's left who can change it."

"You a demon," she says. "A demon."

"Yes," I cry. "Like that thing beside you. And I've been hurting you as well—my gift, it'll kill you if you don't give it up. You have to renounce it. To renounce me. You have to give me up. You have to say it, Monique."

"If she says it, she dies," Nineresh snarls.

"Alexander, show him."

Alexander pulls the sand dollar out of his coat pocket. He's got the little slip of paper that came with it in the other hand.

"This is a sand dollar," he says slowly, glancing at his cheat sheet. I'm glad I coached him, he had trouble sounding some of these words out. "Four holes for the nails in Jesus' hands and feet. One more from a Roman spear. The Easter lily and the Christmas star are on one side, and a po— poin—"

"Poinsettia," I put in.

"On the other side, and five doves for peace hide inside of it." Then he levels his gaze at Nineresh, holding the sand dollar out. "That's why God loves the sand dollar, and so does the Blue Lady."

"Tell it the rest."

"I know what you are." Alexander's voice steadies. He steps forward. I don't want to let him, but I don't have a choice. If these kids don't have the strength to do what they must, I can't save them now. '*I can't save them*—that thought literally drives me to my knees. What good is it being created an angel, what good was any of it ever?

"I know you was an ocean angel just like the Blue Lady," Alexander says, "before you turned bad, and that's how you knew what to look like."

"No," groans Nineresh. It staggers back and raises a hand to block out the sight of him advancing. Yeah, truth hurts, all right. The boy has no idea how many million years of truth he's packing into those few words.

"So I know how beautiful you was in the beginning. And I know how ugly you really" *are*. I know what the truth is now! I know it! And *you* will never be able to fool me or my sister again!" He's shouting now. Nineresh falls to the floor, stretching, trying to scoot away, but Monique is rooted in place somehow.

"Monique," I call again. Her gaze is still on me. "It's already true, I can see it in your eyes. You just have to admit it. Hurry!"

"I give you up, Sephidor." The name rings clear and cold off the patio concrete, off the glass—things of earth, after all. On her chest, the device flickers and dies.

"Good," I say, though it doesn't feel good at all. Not at all. "Now quick, take it off. Put it around his neck!" I have no idea how long the harm can stay locked up in that thing now that it's been turned off, but clearly it's already seeping. Alexander is bent over Nineresh now, trying to press the sand dollar into its face. Nineresh howls and thrashes. Its free hand slaps at the sand dollar, gets sizzled a bit and it howls even harder.

Monique can't quite get the device around its neck with all that going on, but she does get it stuffed into its pants pocket. I toss my Swiss Army knife over so she can cut off the electrical tape. There's a new charge in the air around Alexander, crackling with the power of the new talisman. I better not get any closer.

"Come on, kids. Come on! No, don't drop it, Alexander, come away. Hold it out, keep holding it out. Keep facing him. Don't run, don't show any fear. Come on, Monique!"

Slowly, very slowly, they stand and back up toward me.

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Alexander's crying again. I wish Monique would cry, just once.

"What is it, Alexander?" I set the ridiculous plastic box down. It's not that again, I hope. He almost killed me with his sobs when he first saw it. I had no idea what to say, still don't. Marie-Chantal LaMotte gets no dignity, not even in death. When Ashbury's body dies it'll be the same story.

He sniffles, then wordlessly rubs his eyes, reaches in his jacket pocket and pulls something out. It's a crumpled and folded lump of green I don't recognize.

Monique does.

"Palm leaf."

I nod. "Like the story said."

"Secret stories say a lot of things." The words have a grownup edge I don't like. She glances over Alexander's head at me—daring me to disagree.

"Yeah," I mumble. It's true. Stories say a lot of things. They say if you're a good kid the Blue Lady will come save you. They say you can always trust the angels, that someone's always up there listening and caring. She's learned now that her own story doesn't go like that. Maker knows I'm not the first to put it off-course, but I don't think she'll ever really forgive me for what I've taken away.

I don't think she should.

"Can't put it on her grave if she don't *have* one," Alexander says mournfully.

"Yeah." I cast my gaze over the rolling waves. The wind is blowing outward, out across the water.

"You know," I say, "I think we're doing what we can. I tell you what… " I fish out my lighter. "We can burn your palm leaf. That way its ashes'll go along with hers, out over the ocean, toward the sun."

This hadn't occurred to him. A little light of hope glistens in his wet eyes. He nods. Monique's face slackens, relieved for his sake.

"Will that be good enough?" he asks.

"It'll have to be," Monique asserts. Her gaze seeks the horizon too. They deserve a real angel, both of them. They're not going to get one. Me, I'm done giving them gifts, but maybe I can at least look out for them in human ways. And maybe that will be enough. It'll have to be.

Monique opens the box and lifts it into the light.

The Devil's Sugar

Greg Stolze

With devotion's visage

And pious action do we sugar o'er

The devil himself.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I

The bus was called a "luxu-cruiser." It had a built-in video display at the front, which was currently showing *The Color Purple*. It had two bathrooms and reclining seats an inch wider than you'd find in an airplane's first-class section. Luxu-cruisers were the apex of bus design and were most often used to transport senior citizens on gambling junkets. This bus, however, didn't have *Atlantic City* or *Las Vegas* blazoned on its front-mounted destination sign. Instead, the red LED said *JESUS POWER*.

Luxu-cruisers were built to carry fifty people and a lot of luggage. This cruiser had twenty-seven women, twelve men and one demon from Hell.

No one knew about the demon, of course. He didn't like to draw attention to himself. He simply sat in the back of the bus, smiling slightly, reading *Jack Faust*.

The demon—whose name was Gaviel—lacked horns and wings and cloven hooves. He looked, in fact, exactly like Noah Wallace, the eldest son of the Reverend Matthew Wallace. He was tall, and black, and very handsome. He'd already finished "Paradise Lost" and Marlowe's "Faust." A science-fiction alternate history looked like an interesting change of pace.

(Like most demons, he was looking for someone with faith.)

Noah had left his father's church years earlier. As far as the parishioners knew, he had recently returned to the fold, a true prodigal, repenting his atheism and eager to help his father's work.

The trip to Los Angeles had been his suggestion.

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May Carter had nursed a crush on Noah ever since high school—he'd been a senior and she'd been a freshman. She'd even joined the debate team to be near him, although she was terribly shy and had done poorly. But now she was twenty-one instead of fifteen and determined to talk to him. Even though he was from rich and she was from poor. Even though he was working on a graduate degree and she was working at a dentist's office.

She'd signed up for the "Mission of Mercy" to be near him.

"What'cha reading?" she asked.

He looked up and smiled.

"Nothing much." He set the book aside. He raised the armrest between his seat and the empty one beside him. May sat in the aisle, swaying slightly, dressed in her prettiest Sunday dress.

"Have a seat," he said. She swallowed a little and obeyed.

"Is it for your Master's degree?" The word *master* felt odd in her mouth. "The book I mean?"

"Maybe. Might work for my thesis."

"Yeah?"

"I'm thinking of doing a survey of the Satanic image in literature. Showing how it's changed over the years. You know. Every age gets the Devil it deserves."

"Sounds... interesting."

"The 'demon' in this novel is a space alien offering advanced technology. It wants humanity to self-destruct, because humankind is inherently flawed and animal. That's a very modern view, right? Compared to Milton's Satan, who wants to wreck mankind out of envy for their favored status as children of God."

"Huh." She wished she had something clever to say.

"Pretty dry stuff." He shrugged, turning his body toward hers. "You believe in the Devil, right May?"

Faced with the full force of his gaze, she felt prickly and uncomfortable.

"I guess."

"You guess? You'd better do better than that."

"Do you?"

"Oh yes," he said. "There isn't a doubt in my mind." He turned away to glance out the window.

"People say they saw him in Los Angeles," she said. "During the quake, you know."

"I know."

"Do you think it was really... really the Devil?"

"I think the Adversary takes many forms," he replied. "I think he can be a nightmare, or your fondest dream. He can be a woman beautiful enough to drive you crazy with lust, or he could even be an idea—the most logical, reasonable argument you've ever heard."

"I once heard, if the Devil comes knocking, you should just say, 'Jesus, could you get that?'"

He turned back to her and smiled. "That's good advice. Where'd you hear it?"

He gave her knee a little pat. Her heart gave a jump and her thigh muscles twitched.

"Your father," she replied.

"It's good advice—if you know who's at your door." He tilted his head a little bit. "But *you* have nothing to worry about, right? You have faith—real faith...."

* * *

Gaviel flirted with May until they reached the outskirts of LA. Someone had vandalized a highway sign. It now read "Welcome to Loss Angeles."

A haze of smoke still shrouded the city. Silently, the faithful in the bus peered out the windows. Perhaps they were trying to see the twisted wreckage of the freeways.

Perhaps they were anxiously looking for rioters, or looters, or National Guardsmen. Supposedly the worst had died down. Supposedly it was safe enough for people to return to the City of Angels.

This busload wasn't the first bunch of Christians to come singing prayers and bringing supplies, but it was the first to bring its own camera and crew. In Missouri, the Reverend Matthew Wallace was famous for his show,' *The Hour of Jesus Power*, and at his son's suggestion, he'd rallied his viewers to donate food and blankets and money (always money) for the people of afflicted Los Angeles. Noah Wallace was going to lead a team of the faithful into the broken city and heal it with kindness, with generosity, and with prayer.

Matthew stayed back to negotiate with various cable networks, trying to syndicate the event nationwide.

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As the luxu-cruiser crossed the Los Angeles River, two cops were flanking the back door of an out-of-business restaurant. One was in uniform, named Stan Blandings. The other was plainclothes detective Carrie Grice. Both had guns in hand. Both guns were nonstandard—his a .50 caliber Desert Eagle, hers a .45 Smith & Wesson. Both cops had firm opinions about stopping power.

"Suspect has fled into the culvert," officer Blandings said into his radio. "Repeat, suspect has fled into the 88th Street culvert on foot. Detective Grice and myself are pursuing, over."

This was a lie.

"Backup is on the way," came the dispatcher's crackly voice. Thanks to Blandings, it would go to the wrong area. Grice gave him a tight nod.

"He's shifted," she said, looking at the door. It was rusted metal, dirty and vandalized. On top of that, it had five crumpled finger marks around its edge. Eyeballing it, Grice figured the hand was the size of a baseball mitt.

Blandings licked his lips. "Right."

After opening the door, their quarry had closed it behind him. Delaying pursuit while he fled? Or forcing them to open it so that he could ambush them? Through the crack they saw only dim shadow.

"We have to keep wearing him down," Grice said. Her head was tilted, as if she were listening some interior voice. "When he goes back to human, that's it. He's out of gas."

"Then we bag him."

"Bingo."

"Me point?" Stan was on the side opposite the hinges.

She nodded. "On three." She held up one finger, then two...

Carrie slammed her foot into the door. Its distorted shape scraped the floor as it opened. Stan ducked his head in, then back, then pushed his way through, running to his left. Carrie followed fast, going right, sweeping her flashlight beam through the dusty interior.

Their footsteps echoed as they scuttled to cover behind dusty tables.

"Look." Stan's flashlight beam followed a diminishing blood trail toward the front door.

Carrie glanced where he was pointing, so she didn't see the creature erupt out of the ceiling.

She should have known. She'd seen it crawl up walls like fucking Spider-Man, she'd seen people hide in drop ceilings in a dozen bad action movies. The difference was, a real drop ceiling wouldn't support a grown man, let alone a monster eight feet tall. But grown men can't cling to a roof with their iron-sharp claws....

They didn't teach this shit at the police academy.

Carrie turned back and fired as Stan bellowed. The thing had dropped behind him like an ape, seized an arm and a thigh in its massive hands. She squeezed off a shot as it hauled Stan up over its head. She missed. One of the thing's dark wings slithered across, under its arm and along Stan's gut. He shrieked. The wings looked like wet, black rubber, but they cut like razors.

She aimed low—couldn't take the chance of hitting Blandings—and her second bullet tore through the thing's hip. It hurled Stan at her as she fired again, hitting its torso this time.

Carrie lunged aside but Blandings crashed into her anyway, knocking her down. The thing seized a table and flung it. She fired again, blindly, before tucking her head between her arms, trying to roll away, but the table hit her left arm with a sickening crunch. Bone broke and a jolt of pain shot through her head. She heard Blandings shoot as she sat up.

Daylight framed the beast for a moment as it sailed out the door. The holes in its gut and leg were closing as she watched.

"Awwww *dammit!*" Blandings moaned. Looking over, she could see his shirtfront and pants covered in blood, bile and shit. The thing had opened his intestines, spilling their contents all over him.

"Cocksucker," he grunted, grabbing the edges of the slash and squeezing them together. He winced and repeated the action as he moved along the injury, pressing the edges like a clay seam. With similar groans, Carrie pinned her left hand under her left knee and yanked her splintered arm straight. The bones crackled into alignment and she grimaced. Half a year's healing in a moment. Still hurt like hell, though.

"Follow?" Blandings asked, panting.

"He could be out in the alley, waiting to ambush us again."

"Out the front and around, then."

She took a deep breath. She was tired, and they were probably going to be playing cat and mouse for a long time yet.

As they exited, neither saw a gray subcompact tooling along, with a figure in a dark raincoat behind the wheel.

Following the subcompact was the demon Gaviel.

* * *

The thing the cops were chasing was another demon, this one named Joriel, and it was getting very tired. He could feel his human shape—puny, miserable, weak—pushing through, trying to crawl back to the surface, trying to rob him of his unearthly power and grandeur.

He turned one eyeball-tipped tentacle down and actually saw the fingers moving under his skin, saw the mewling face of George Morrison press against the underside of his night-black chest.

"Ah... holy *fuuuck!*"

He spun around. A bum! A sickly, spat-up human lying in filth, but he could be Joriel's salvation. The demon raised mighty arms and spread his wings like a cloak.

"LOOK UPON ME AND TREMBLE!"

Nothing!

Joriel couldn't understand it. The bum didn't believe.

(Like most demons, Joriel was hungry for belief.)

An eight-foot-tall monster, tentacles where its hair should be, eyes on the tentacles and a mouth full of black razor-sharp fangs splitting the top of its head instead of the front... and he *didn't believe*. He hid his face in his hands, probably blaming it on drugs or drink, doubting his sanity... thinking anything but that he was facing a demon from Hell in an alley in Watts.

Joriel didn't have time to persuade. His right-hand claws sank into the man's shoulder like he was kneading bread dough. He plunged his fingertips around the bulb of bone, prying it from the shoulder socket and slicing the tendon. The man screamed and screamed as Joriel's hideous face bent down before him.

"DO YOU DOUBT ME NOW?"

As his left fingers probed for the gaps between the man's ribs, reaching through skin and fat to probe behind the breastbone, he could feel it.

"There is no god but God and Mohammed is..." Joriel's victim babbled in his last moments, and the demon drank in his dying belief. It wasn't much. But it was enough.

"Rumbling hobos to become more real? My, you've come to a sorry pass."

Joriel spun and saw another man looking at him.... No, not a man. Another like him. An escaped demon.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"My name is not lightly given—especially to one in desperate straits."

"DO NOT TAUNT ME, FOR I HAVE POWER ENOUGH TO CONTEND WITH YOU!"

"Perhaps." The other rebel looked and sounded dubious. "But could you then battle your pursuers?"

"How do you know about them?"

"Please. The way you've been acting, it's a wonder every Elohim in California can't sense you. You don't have any worshippers, do you?" He asked, but before the monster could reply, they were interrupted.

"There it is!"

Grice and Blandings rounded the corner, guns out, only to find their bloodstained prey conversing with a well-dressed black man. He turned and—with disturbing grace—a 9mm pistol appeared in his hand. Grice covered this new threat while Blandings kept his gun aimed at the towering horror.

"Oh dear," the human said. "Vassals." He said it the way Richard Nixon would have said "Communists."

"This is none of your business," Grice said.

"Seeing humans torment Elohim? I'll make that my business."

"You're willing to shoot a cop?" Blandings asked, his eyes never budging from Joriel.

The man snickered. "I've raised arms against the punishing angels of God. Your little badge hardly frightens me."

"Go ahead and shoot," Carrie said. "We're not as helpless as you think."

"I'm sure. What did you get for your souls? Physical invulnerability? What, no? Something less? Rapid healing maybe?" He shook his head slightly. "You didn't bargain very wisely, but it doesn't matter. None of that would work against bullets blessed by a Catholic priest."

"I don't care if you've got the Pope's own machinegun," Blandings said, but his eyes flickered off Joriel for a second...

...and the beast was aloft, darting up and forward on a sweep of great wings. The wind of its lunge blew trash and dust into the air, but the clap of noise was drowned out by three gunshots. Blandings' gun spat hot flame, but the shot went wide. The black man missed as well, but it didn't matter. He was changing. Grice hit, but her bullet had no visible effect on the figure that was swelling before her, bursting upwards in radiant light, skin glowing with the fire of angry judgment. It had been the man, and it had missed her, but she couldn't think that, couldn't imagine this being failing at anything, couldn't conceive of anything but its grandeur and majesty....

She ran, dropping her gun in panic, forgetting Stan in her haste to flee.

As the black man returned to his mortal form, he looked at the other demon as it squatted on the policeman's chest, lowering its head to feed.

"You can call me Noah," he said.

"AND I AM THE RABISU JORIEL, DARKNESS OF THE DEEPS."

Around the corner, a figure in a raincoat crouched, listening unseen.

* * *

A few miles away, May was giving a bright smile to a dirty young girl. It was a good smile. May practiced it a lot on children at the dentist's office.

"Hey there honey," she said. "Is that soup good?"

The little girl nodded, slurping her second bowl.

"You want to tell me your name?"

The girl thought about it and said "DeToya."

"That's a pretty name."

The Christian Aid worker—an exhausted man named John—had told May that the girl seemed to be in shock. "And she's terrified of white people," he'd said, very matter-of-factly.

"Is your last name as pretty as your first name?"

The girl shrugged.

"What's your last name, hon?"

"Carmody."

"DeToya Carmody." May felt a brief surge of satisfaction. It was more than the social workers had gotten. "Do you know where your parents are?"

Instantly, May knew it was the wrong question. DeToya curled up and began pushing herself back away from May, pausing only to grab a packet of crackers to take with her. May put her hands up and crept forward. "It's okay. It's all good, sugar. You're safe now."

DeToya stopped crawling. May could see tears in the girl's watchful eyes.

"They dead," she said. "The white folks ate 'em."

"What?" May asked, then shook her head. "Oh, poor sweetie... you're okay now."

"I got away 'cause I'm small. Like that girl in *Aliens*. I hid in little places where the white folks couldn't go."

May wondered what kinds of parents let a nine-year-old watch *Aliens* as she slowly encircled DeToya with her arms. Then she frowned. The girl had bandages on her arms and legs, crusted over with dried blood.

"Who bandaged you, sweetie?"

"Mama." DeToya's voice cracked. That one word was trying to carry too much longing and misery, and it broke under the strain.

"Okay, you're going to have to be brave while we change those...."

Moments later, May was choking back bile.

Under the gauze pads were bite marks. Someone else might have been unsure, but to the practiced eye of a dental assistant, they were clearly human.

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"LA is full of the fallen," Joriel said. He'd resumed his human form—a pasty, pudgy white man. He and—"Noah"(Gaviel, really, but the Rabisu didn't know that name) were sitting on a partially melted bus stop bench. "If the Morningstar was here, no one found him. Or they're staying quiet about it."

"Why are you here?"

"My duke bade me come." The Rabisu shook his head. "He thought the sight of the Morningstar might make it easy to gain human praise."

"Not a bad thought. You had any luck with that?"

"No. Were it not for my master's command, I'd have no truck with worship."

Gaviel found that admission interesting, in light of the woman in the gray car.

"Indeed," he said. "Why should we trade, or beg, for what we can simply take?"

"I've seen some fallen with clutches of thralls, sharing out their favors like... like candy to children! But they're the ones who are truly dependent."

"Servants who ought be masters," Gaviel said, nodding. "Are there many such here?"

"Some fallen, yes, most with some sort of cult or church. Then there are... others... "

"Others?"

"Old demons, swollen fat with power. They won't treat with the likes of us. To them, we're only pawns... or food. Most of the cults in this area have one such as that at their core."

"Thus those two cops?"

"They've been hounding me for days."

"What about recent arrivals like you and me?"

"Oh, there are many, but they're all worthless. Some think they can rule the world. Some think the old war was never lost, and they still search for Lucifer. I met one of the Neberu who thinks we can actually *make peace* with The One and humankind." He snorted in disgust.

"Absurd."

"So speaks a man with blessed bullets?"

The black man chuckled. "Well, that was kind of a bluff."

"What?"

"In fact, that was the first time I fired a gun, but I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Joriel just stared for a moment. "Would such bullets really resist their powers?"

"No idea."

"It's a strange new world in which we find ourselves."

"Back to the topic at hand: this other 'newcomer' you met."

"She's a fool, eager to scuttle back into the holy host. She would bare her neck for the blade and never admit it was falling."

"She's surely not long for this world."

"Maybe next time around she'll be wiser."

"Indeed." Noah ran a finger along his chin. "Somebody that foolish will surely become someone's weapon, or victim, sooner or later."

"She was nearly *my* victim."

"And could be my weapon."

The other demon gave him a suspicious glance.

"Come now," Noah said. "You yourself said she was stupid."

Joriel's lip curled. "Tricking others into fighting your battles may be necessary for the weak, but I see no reason to side with her."

"A fair fight is ideal, of course, but if you look around you might notice this is no longer an ideal world."

Regarding the dirt and decay, Joriel the Rabisu could not disagree. He tried another tack.

"Why should I trust *you*—Devil, Namaru, honey-tongue?"

"After I saved your life?"

"Oh, I appreciate that, but..." The Darkness of the Deeps frowned, realization crossing his mortal visage. "Just how did you appear when I was most needful?"

"I sensed the energies your conflict roused," Gaviel said. "Fearing that one of my fellows was in peril, I sped to the scene." He neglected, once more, to mention what had *really* led him.

"And now that the peril is over, you wish to aid me further?"

"Certainly! Your domain was the beasts of the sea, and mine was the lights of the sky, but even during the war I heard of the Darkness of the Deeps. It pains me to see you in such straits, but I would be honored to fight by your side—if you'll have me."

"I don't even know a name to conjure you with."

"Gaviel." Seeing the other's look of suspicion, he sighed. "I know my house is known for deceit—wrongly, I say—but what can I do to demonstrate my goodwill?"

The other demon said nothing, just shrugged. "You have shown courage," he admitted, "That's something, but..."

Gaviel uttered a short, sharp sound unheard on Earth since the dawn of time.

The Darkness's eyes widened.

"There. The first syllable of my true name. Is that sufficient? Or would you have all of it, enough to bind me down?"

"I..." The Rabisu was obviously confused. "I guess I've wronged you. I apologize."

He did not offer part of his own true name in return, nor did Gaviel expect it.

* * *

When Detective Carrie Grice was an awkward fourteen-year-old Fresno girl, embarrassed by her developing breasts, she got harassed in broad daylight by a pair of grimy men who were, inexplicably, drunk at a strip mall at noon. Young Carrie was terrified until a police officer came along, rousted the drunks, and took her home.

Ten years later, she was a rookie policing the streets of Huntington Park in LA. Her very first day on the job, she was first on the scene when a sixty-five-year-old grandmother got her teeth knocked out. Someone—a tall, heavyset man—broke into her house and hit her in the mouth with a candlestick until all her teeth were shattered. He didn't take anything or ask her anything or say anything to her.

He was never caught.

Grice couldn't figure it. Stuff like bank heists and drug murders and even rape—it made sense. It was wrong, but reasonable. But random acts of wickedness... she just couldn't wrap her brain around them, and it bugged her.

She got into the LAPD's bustling Narcotics Division and gradually became an expert on a pair of high-moving smugglers named Luis and Raoul Orgullo. The Orgullos were bad news, but they were rational, and that distracted her from the other kind of cases... for a while. But her mind always came back to that shocked, toothless woman. Or back to the smart-mouthed drunks from her adolescence. Or to all of the other pointless, meaningless, joyless villainies she could remember from her years on the force.

A more stereotypical cop would have become an alcoholic, or a cynic, or a burnt-out PI doing background checks for software companies. Instead, Carrie looked for answers.

She found a demon.

The demon explained that the world was broken, that God had forsaken mankind, and that the best anyone could hope for was to negotiate from strength. Carrie didn't want to believe it, at first, but it made more sense than anything else.

* * *

Eventually, Gaviel and Joriel left the bus bench to get frittatas and plan.

"So..." Gaviel started. "That vassal cop who got away. Do you know who she is?"

"Her name is Carrie Grice. She is pledged to some powerful regional demon."

"That's what you know?"

"It's enough to kill her."

"You'd think so, but she's not dead. Rather than charge in headlong, why not get a little tactical intelligence on her?"

Joriel looked down at his hands. "She did surprise me before," he grudgingly admitted.

"Great. While you do that, I'm going to go find this other demon you were talking about. The Neberu."

"What possible good can that do?"

"Whatever else you think of them, they are good at preventing surprises. Do you remember her title?"

"The Sower of Falling Stars."

"Mm... don't remember her."

"If you want to conjure her, I have her celestial name."

Gaviel smiled. "Excellent. How do you know her?"

"She saved my life in the war against Heaven."

* * *

The house sat crazy on the hill. During the earthquake, it had slid off its foundation and drifted ten feet downwards. The second story was completely collapsed—the once-beautiful first floor mashed beneath it on the downhill side. As Gaviel stepped inside, he felt the ghost of a reaction from Noah Wallace's stolen memories. It was unnatural—the slope of the floor, the way his feet slid down to come to a rest at the angle of a wall.

"Hello?" he called. He cleared his throat and spoke again, this time in the first language, that spoken in Eden itself.

A bullet slammed through the back of his spine. He plunged forward, barely managing to fling his arms up before his face could fit in the V between the carpet and the paneling. He frowned and concentrated, fitting his bones together, making blood, mending flesh.... As he did so, a hand seized his shoulder and spun him around.

A small woman, blonde, all muscle and sinew. She had a compact pistol leveled at his face.

"Edasul, I presume?" he said.

"Who told you that name?"

"A rather large and stupid fellow with tentacles on his head."

"The Darkness of the Deeps. I should have known." She drew the gun's hammer back.

"If you're going to shoot me again, could you do the face? These clothes are soiled enough."

"You're a pretty pathetic killer."

He considered this statement, then nodded. "That's a fair assessment. Good thing I didn't come here to kill you."

"The Darkness wouldn't send you for any other reason."

"He has bigger problems than you. I have bigger problems than you. And you have bigger problems than either of us. And yet, here we are, spinning our wheels, bickering and sniping and putting holes in each others' shirts."

Edasul took a step back, but the pistol never wavered. "You're talking about the Earthbound."

"Is that what you call them? Big, potent, crazy demons with police officer thralls?"

She shrugged. "I've steered clear of them so far."

"Mm, yes, I can see how the Darkness's distracting rampages would make that fairly simple. Not to mention Lucifer's display. But the Morningstar is gone, and you and I both know the Rabisu's brute nihilism and arrogance toward humanity gives him a fairly limited shelf life. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless someone smarter could redirect his admirable reserves of energy in a more constructive direction."

"Someone like you."

"Mm, you could do it if he still trusted you. But you wasted that chance."

"I don't trust you, either."

"Do you at least trust me to be selfish? Because I think three can survive longer than two. Especially if two of those three are willing to let the third be suicidally stupid—when the time is right."

"Once more, a Devil calls us to arms, just like the Morningstar at the dawn of the war. Is leadership really that addictive to you?"

"It is what my house was made for, but this isn't about that. It's about survival. It's about... maybe making some peace with the world, with our situation." He hung his head. "This body... this man... Noah... he never made peace with his father. Or with his faith. I just wish..." He shrugged.

She squinted at him, skeptically. "Faith," she said.

"That's what it's all about, right?"

"And you're asking me to have faith in you."

"Yes. And to demonstrate my good faith to you..."

For the second time that day, he spoke part of his true name. For the second time, he gave away part of the key to his destiny, his enslavement or his utter destruction.

For the second time that day, it bought him an ally.

◆ ◆ ◆

The three demons met in neutral territory—a playground that had been in rough shape even before the earthquake and riots. Now it was much worse. The jungle gym was dented and distorted where people had been tied to it and beaten with planks from the seesaws, and its paint was chipped from missed blows with swing set chains. The park had been circled with police tape, but everyone ignored it. The cops had bigger problems.

"George," Gaviel said pleasantly. "Can you fill us in on Ms. Grice's situation?"

Joriel's lumpy human form gave Edasul's compact mortal shape a suspicious glare. "I talked to a few cops. They're pretty sure she's dirty."

"How'd you get that out of them?" Edasul asked.

"Persuasion." He smirked, and for a moment his teeth looked black and sharp.

"Dirty in what fashion?" Gaviel asked.

"Not sure. But there was some business with Blandings and missing evidence from a drug bust."

"That's the best you could do?" Edasul demanded, rolling her eyes. "Did you get something *I* can use? A piece of her clothes or some hair or something?"

"Would this do?" Gaviel produced a small lead lump. "It's a bullet she fired in anger."

"Where'd you get it?"

"It was lodged in my thighbone." He glanced at Joriel. "Why don't you let her see Blandings' gun, too?"

The Darkness of the Deeps made a point of removing the clip and clearing the chamber before he handed over the huge weapon.

"Okay then," Edasul said, rolling the spent slug in one hand like a gambler's die. "Hm..." Her tiny fingers slid up and down Blandings' pistol, almost caressing it.

After a moment, she gave a short laugh and her eyes popped open.

"Pathetic," she said.

"What?"

"These two sold their souls for—get this—a coke deal. They got some ancillary benefits, like rapid healing and immunity to age, but the biggest reward they could imagine was winding up as wealthy LA drug barons."

"It's come to pass," Joriel said. "Humanity is so degraded they can no longer even *sin* greatly."

"What kind of coke deal?" Gaviel asked. The Sower of Falling Stars gave him a suspicious glare.

"Why should we care?"

"Surely you jest. A demon's thrall who just happens to be a police detective? Who's putting herself in a position where we can get *mortals* to strip her of her authority and imprison her, without exposing ourselves? Tactical opportunities like that don't pop up every day."

"Then you'll be pleased to know the buy is tonight."

Joriel smiled. "So she will be distracted," he said with relish.

"And a lot of money will change hands," Gaviel said, glancing obliquely at Edasul.

"The money isn't that important," she said.

"Then perhaps you'd like to do a *good deed*," the Darkness replied. "Keeping all the dirty nose goodies away from the monkeys."

The Neberu and the Rabisu exchanged heated words, and Gaviel let them fight. As long as they were arguing about"*why* they should go, neither would reconsider staying away.

Besides, the squabble distracted them from a figure in a dark raincoat heading for a gray subcompact. Each of them saw her. But only Gaviel thought she might matter.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Can I get an"'Amen?" asked Reverend Matthew Wallace.

"AMEN!"

The minister wasn't present in the flesh, but his image towered above the congregation on a fifteen-foot projection screen.

"Son? Are you there?"

"I'm here father," Noah—or Gaviel—said. A camera was pointed at him, but he was looking up and to his left. They'd arranged it so that, on the broadcast, his image would be in a box at the lower right, with Matthew's face taking up most of the screen, looking down toward him.

"And what have you seen in Los Angeles?"

"I've seen suffering!"

There was a noise of agreement from the crowd.

"And I've seen loss!"

More agreement.

"And I've seen pain and anger!"

The crowd was really behind him.

"But greater than all those, I've seen *love!*"

"Hallelujah!" "Amen!" "Praise the Lord!" The cameras switched to a single screen format. It panned across the crowd and, by a trick of fate, happened upon May. Tears shone on her cheeks as she looked worshipfully upwards. Then it switched back to Noah, filling the screen with his face.

"I saw love in the eyes of the people back home as they opened their hearts to this mission of mercy. I saw an old widow, so bent beneath the weight of years that she had to come to church in a wheelchair, and that old widow brought a blanket, this blanket," Noah shook it in the air, "that she made with her old, arthritic hands. I've seen it in the eyes of the poor people of Missouri, people with little enough for themselves, but when we asked they gave what they could, even if it was just a can of corn or a few measly quarters, but it'*matters* because they were giving *love!*"

"Amen!"

"I've seen love in the eyes of the suffering here—good people, people of faith, people who did no wrong but were smitten by toil and misery—I've seen their love and gratitude when we brought them simple comfort. But clearest of all, I've seen the love shining from the faces of our parishioners here, who have traveled far, brought much and worked hard on behalf of this sorrowing city. I'll tell you this, America. I'll tell you. You may think that we've brought a lot to Los Angeles. We've brought money, and clothing, and food, and we've brought comfort and kindness and the Good News, but what I'm taking back home with me is more than I brought. I'm taking home love, brothers and sisters. I can feel it. Can you feel it?"

"Amen!" "Testify, brother!"

"Can you feel it?"

"I feel it!" "Glory! Hallelujah!"

"I feel it too! Our love, and their love, and it's all part of the One Love, people. It's all part of Christ's love. Just when you think you've got all of it, that you know all there is to it, that you have to, have to *drive to Los Angeles* just to share it—you find out there's more of it!"

"Praise the Lord!"

"So when the people out here thank me—when they say 'Thank you Noah, thank you for coming out here, thank you for the food, for the money, for just being here'—All I can say in return is 'No. Thank *you*. Thank you for the *love*.'"

The applause was thunderous.

Afterwards, he changed his shirt yet again and was checking with the videographer as May approached him.

"You're sure you have all the footage you need?"

"Pretty sure, yeah...."

"If we need to reshoot, we can do it tomorrow?"

"Are you going somewhere?" May asked.

He gave her a bright smile. "I'm afraid I have to."

"But... tonight's the banquet. From the local churches."

"I wish I could go, but I have some pressing business."

"What sort of business?"

He took both her hands in his and gave her a somber look.

"May, if it was only my business, I'd tell you. But it's not my story to tell. I made a promise to someone. I have to keep it. Do you understand?"

Hesitantly, she nodded.

"Believe me, I'd rather be banqueting with you. But I have to do this."

Reluctantly, she released his hands. As he turned, she wondered if that"'you' was plural or singular.

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By 8:30 that night, lots of people were dead or injured at Grossman Storage.

The coke smugglers Luis and Raoul Orgullo were suspicious about their new business partner, so they took the precaution of showing up plenty early and placing a few associates in and around the warehouse.

Of course, the police—who believed that Grice had set up a straightforward buy-and-bust—were also infiltrating the neighborhood.

Everyone involved took pains to keep everything looking normal, but there was still an intangible tension in the air as eight o'clock approached. It was unnaturally quiet—the rats and mice and seagulls had vacated the area as soon as the demons had approached—and the silence made Grice bite her lips as she walked into the warehouse.

Ten minutes later, the police charged in and the gunfire started. Watching from a nearby coffee shop, Gaviel finished his hot tea with lemon and delicately patted his lips.

"Shall we go?"

Inside the warehouse, the reek of cordite was already heavy. There were SWAT cops taking point with heavy weapons and body armor. But the Orgullos' friends had trained at the School of the Americas and were using weapons from South American military aid packages. The training and weapons of each side were remarkably similar. But the Orgullos also had a compact and powerful radio jammer to keep the cops from coordinating, which made things much less certain.

Gaviel followed Edasul into the warehouse. They'd seen Grice go in with an alligator briefcase and come out with two small brushed-steel suitcases. They were going after the briefcase while Joriel was killing Grice.

"Just follow me close," Edasul said. Gaviel obeyed. In times of trouble, there were worse places to stand than behind someone who sees the future.

For no apparent reason, she grabbed him and pulled him behind a stack of pallets. Seconds later, three policemen in riot gear bolted past, muttering "Go, go, *go!*"

Edasul shut her eyes for a moment, then said "Okay, we have to go left up here." Gaviel nodded, wondering how Joriel was doing against Grice.

They crept along and stopped again, leaning against an interior wall that was plasterboard to about waist-height, and then became Plexiglas. She squeezed her eyes shut. "All right, they're on the other side of this wall. One of them is badly hurt; he can't shoot. There's a guard with them, he has a machinegun too and he's about... five paces that way. But he's deafened from the gunfire, so..."

"I understand," Gaviel said, standing up and pointing his pistol.

"*No, don't!*" Edasul shouted, but it was too late. Gaviel fired through the Plexiglas and missed both men. They turned and opened fire just as he did a flat dive out of the way. Bullets slammed into Edasul, hard enough to drive her back into a pile of boxes.

With an unearthly scream, she arose changed. Wings of starless midnight unfolded, and she lunged forward with eyes, claws and teeth burning like distant suns. She was a figure of glory and terror, and if the two men hadn't already been shooting, they'd have dropped to their knees in mindless awe. But they were firing, and in panicky situations, human beings are more likely to stay in their rut than try anything new. They kept attacking as she swooped in slashing and howling. Edasul had the strength to heal some of the wounds, and she had prophetic powers to avoid some of the others.

But her focus on them meant she wasn't watching Gaviel. He took calm aim, but waited. He saw no point in betraying her before she killed the smugglers for him. When she could no longer support her angelic form, he opened fire. The remaining crook kept hysterically shooting at her even after she dropped, so it was easy for Gaviel to get behind him and fire from point-blank range.

Edasul wasn't dead, and he hadn't expected her to be. She was trying to scrabble toward the still-hot machine pistol in a dead man's limp hand. Gaviel easily beat her to it, treading on her fingers in the process.

"Traitor," she snarled, eyes of night and stars glaring from a mortal face.

"Now, now," he said, kneeling next to her. "You don't want some petty, impotent recrimination as the final act of the Sower of Fallen Stars, do you? Why not be classy and forgive me? After all, that's what you expect of *God*, isn't it?"

"I'll be back, and I'll hunt you...."

"Wrong, and wrong again. No forgiveness, huh? Pity. Might have made devouring you easier."

Her eyes widened and turned human with fear. In the war, demons had cannibalized defeated angels, but committing such an act on one another...

"You didn't think I was just in this for the money, did you?" Gaviel asked, as claws of flame sprang from his fingers.

He made his way back to the front door with a quick and competent stealth that would have surprised Edasul a great deal. He got shot several times, but nobody tried to take his briefcase away, and after a few moments of playing dead he was always able to close the wounds and continue.

Gaviel wondered how he'd get to the car unnoticed, but he needn't have worried. The Darkness of the Deeps was, as he'd hoped, making quite a spectacle of himself. He'd severed one of Detective Grice's legs somehow and was holding her thrashing body above his head so that the spurting blood fell down his throat. With his other hand, he had a patrolman by the neck and was shaking him the way a terrier shakes a rat.

The cops and the remaining smugglers were all resolutely firing in Joriel's direction. The fact that they were hitting his two chew toys as well didn't seem to register.

Gaviel reached George Morrison's car without incident. Then he paused. Joriel's resilience really was admirable. But he was starting to flag. Fresh injuries weren't closing over immediately, and at the rate he was taking hits, he wouldn't last long.

As his ears picked up the sounds of a SWAT officer weeping "Oh-god-oh-god-oh-*gawd*..." over and over, a smile cracked his face.

An instant later, the glittering form of Gaviel, Angel of Light and Lord of the Summer Sun, appeared on the fray.

"TO HELL RETURNETH, ABOMINABLE CREATURE!" he shouted and swept forward as the Darkness crashed to his knees. The other demon was just returning to his human form when the cruel fire of Gaviel's wings surrounded him.

A few of the watchers just kept shooting, but most fell down and gave thanks.

Gaviel felt it but didn't acknowledge it as he took to the sky, looking for... there.

The brushed steel suitcase, lying bloodstained where Grice had dropped it. No one was paying attention to it and, moments later, they were still looking up and wondering where the winged apparition had flown when a handsome black man discreetly picked up the case.

Gaviel patted the gun in his pocket and wondered, momentarily, what had happened to the second case, but he was too tired to pursue it. He'd forced an awful lot onto reality, and reality hadn't taken it lying down. All that on top of a great deal of physical effort and trauma. He might be a celestial being, but his instincts belonged to a sheltered intellectual, and the tension was catching up to him.

As he walked towards his car, he passed a gray subcompact. He was so distracted—thinking about how Joriel's spirit had managed to escape him at the last moment—that he didn't even notice it. He didn't see the woman in the dark raincoat, just as Edasul hadn't seen Gaviel aiming at her. And like her, he was taken unaware.

* * *

"Who are you?"

Gaviel blinked and concentrated on the pain in the back of his head. But he decided not to heal it. There were limits to how much he could impose on the material world, and after his busy day, those limits were fast approaching.

"I'm Noah Wallace." He tried to turn onto his side but felt a strange weight on his chest, and at each wrist and ankle. He blinked his eyes clear and saw a bedroom ceiling. There was a stain, water damage. He looked left. There was a communion wafer sitting on his wrist. He also saw a bedside table, a teddy bear, a nondescript chest of drawers with photos and candles and a weary-looking fern.

He looked right and saw another wafer, and a stout woman holding his stolen machine pistol. Her face had a horrible blankness that drained any warmth or humor out of her sweatshirt (which read *Someone in Menominee, WI Loves Me!)*.

She wasn't wearing her raincoat, but he recognized her. Even before he saw her face, he felt the familiar, itching belief that seemed to follow her like a stench.

Mentally, he cursed himself for getting distracted by the Sower and the Darkness and the promise of ill-gotten wealth. But he let none of it show on his face.

She poked him with the barrel of the weapon and asked, "*What are you?*"

He glanced down at the Eucharist resting on his chest.

"I think you know," he replied. "Why else would you restrain me with the Body of Christ?"

"You're a demon, then," she said, standing up and pacing back and forth. "A demon. But what's a demon? What are you doing? Why here? Why now?"

"You saw Lucifer, didn't you?"

She spun, her eyes wide. "How did you know?"

"I've seen his effect on mortals."

"Everything's ruined now," she muttered.

"Yep, that's the Morningstar all right."

"Shut up!" she shrieked.

He said nothing. She took a deep breath.

"I had a normal life," she said. "I worked and I went bowling and saw movies, I went out and got drinks with friends and I was"*normal*. And now..."

"Now you've seen him."

"Now I've seen *him* and I can't get him out of my head! I can't stand normal anymore! I can't stand anything that isn't him!"

"That's quite a problem. And yet, if you're plagued by thoughts of demons, I question why you'd go to the trouble of capturing one."

"I want you to explain," she said. "I want to *understand*. I want to know what he did to me!"

"Did to you? You did it to yourself."

"You're lying!"

"What do I possibly have to gain from lying to you?"

She hesitated. "Demons always lie," she said.

"In that case, it's awfully silly to ask me questions. Why not let me go?" He gave her a charming smile.

"I'll get the truth out of you. I'll *make* you tell me," she threatened.

"Oh? And just how might you do that?"

She bit her lip, uncertain.

"Burn me with a hot light bulb?" he suggested.

"Chinese water torture? I understand that prying up fingernails is particularly painful." He shook his head. "Good grief. You can't even think up a torture, can you?"

"I can think of plenty!"

"And they might work on a human being. But look, Miss... Do you have a name?"

She shifted back, suspicious. He rolled his eyes.

"Miss Doe. Miss Anonymous. Miss Lucifer-Obsessed, whatever. Do you honestly think there is anything you can do to me to outstrip Hell itself? I've spent the last *ten thousand years* in a place designed by *God the Most High* as the ultimate agony. Do you really think there's anything *you* can do that's going to scare me? Torture away! Go ahead! Having a red hot curling iron up my ass is a picnic next to Hell. You could torment me until you *die of old age*. It won't matter to me. It'll just waste the only life *you'll* ever have."

"Or I could kill you."

"Also an option, though disposing of my body after your neighbors hear the gunshot is a challenge that I don't think you're up to, given how distracted you are. Besides, you don't want to."

"I'm starting to," she sneered.

"Honestly, you don't. If you just wanted to kill me, you could have done that on the street. You brought me here for something. What is it?"

She looked away. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle.

"Do you even know what you want?"

"It's not that my old life was so great," she said, and Gaviel realized she was crying. "But it was all I had. And I don't know how to go back!"

He waited, timing it. When he judged her sobs to be ripe, he said "Are you sure you'd like to?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. "Everything is so"*horrible*! All the riots, and the fires, the looting... I mean, there are worse things. Things that didn't get on the news.

People went crazy! I saw these three women? They'd caught this cop and they *skinned him alive*. They did it right down there in the street! In broad daylight! They held him down on the hood of a Camaro... its car alarm started going off... and they peeled off his skin! Everyone could see. People were yelling things. Encouragement! The policeman was just screaming until he, he couldn't. No one helped him! If you look, you can still see the bloodstains on the asphalt...."

She trailed off. Eventually, Gaviel said, "That does make bowling and work sound appealing."

"But when I saw *him* he was so... so beautiful, but more than that. He was so *real!* It was like... like in 'The Wizard of Oz,' when suddenly everything's color? He was like that. He was my colors!"

"Wonder and horror are better friends than humans like to admit. Look, let's try an experiment. Close your eyes." She squinted at him and he sighed.

"That ugly leer of suspicion is close, but try shutting them *all the way*. There. Now, I want you to think back on your old life. Your job. What do you do?"

"I do medical exams for Met Life."

"Meet many interesting people?"

Almost against her will, she seemed to relax into the comforting, mundane questions. "Some, now and then."

"You get up in the morning and you shower, you eat breakfast... what do you drink in the mornings, coffee? Tea?"

"Orange juice, usually."

"Orange juice, and you put on your makeup and think about the day's appointments, you think about doing laundry or going to the store or picking up your dry cleaning. It's a normal day."

"I feed the cats. In the morning."

"Right. Nothing special. You're going to watch some TV in the evening, or maybe grab a beer with the gals from the office. Right?"

She nodded.

"In this very ordinary day you have a neurological event."

"A what?"

"Something happens to your brain. Maybe it's a stroke. Maybe a small tumor has grown to the point that it's pressing your frontal lobe. Maybe it's a limbic chemical imbalance, maybe some joker spiked your OJ with LSD. Maybe you took a blow to the head during the earthquake."

"But nothing like that..."

"Ever happened? How do you know? Because you don't remember? Because you saw a corona of light and felt unearthly love and devotion? Because everything seemed flat and unreal afterwards? Brain damage could account for all of that."

"What I saw... it wasn't..."

"You might forget a blow to the head because of amnesia—either physical or psychological. Pressure on the optic nerve can result in flares of color. A harsh fluctuation in your dopamine and neuropeptide levels can give an eerie rush of intense feeling, followed by a backwash of listlessness, depression and uncertainty."

"It was on the TV though..."

"Ah. As if no one with neurological damage ever confabulated memories after seeing something suggestive on television! Look, everything you've experienced to date suggests that what you saw was *not real*. So either you've been wrong all your life, or you're mistaken now. Which is *really* more realistic? Demons and angels? Or insurance and orange juice?"

"I... I guess..."

Her forehead was contorted with confusion and her mouth was wide open, but Gaviel didn't need to hear her answer. He could sense it. He could feel her doubt as the tokens of faith that restrained him became mere unleavened bread again.

As he sat up, the bedsprings creaked. Her eyes shot open and she pointed the gun at him. He raised his hands reassuringly.

"And now we've established that you *can* go back—if you wish. Your old life offers comfort and routine... but you're worried that it's meaningless and false. I can actually tell you that, yes, it is. Bowling and work do not matter. In the larger scheme of things, you were—and could once more be—as insignificant as an ant. On the other hand, you c've been exposed to a new life that is bigger, and more important, and more real. But it's full of danger, and uncertainty, and maddening horror alongside its glory and magnificence. It tempts you, but you have no idea how to live it. Right?"

Mutely, she nodded.

"I can free you from this dilemma, if you let me. But there are two doors out of it, and you have to pick which one. Do you want to go forward, or back?"

Her mouth opened and closed. "Can you make me forget him?"

"I can't promise that. But I can make the memory meaningless. I can release you from an impassioned longing that has no place in the rational world. I can give you back the same future that every normal person has."

"Or the other door?"

"I can initiate you into the mysteries. I can make you my partner in all that I do, sharing my power and partaking in my fate. I can't promise we'll find the Morningstar. But if we do, you won't face him as one puny human among the multitude."

"You're talking about selling my soul, aren't you?"

"Oh, *that*. Yes. That's the key to the cage, through either door."

"And if I don't accept your help?"

"You can stay stuck where you are, forever." He leaned in and gently took the gun from her unresisting hands. "If you just want me to leave—fine, no harm, no foul. But before you make up your mind, look deep inside and ask yourself who really has your soul now."

He waited until he could see a decision on her face.

"At least with me, you get something in trade," he said.

She bowed her head and whispered her choice. He nodded.

Then he began draining life out of her.

It was so painful, so swift, that she didn't even cry out. She just crumpled into a ball and fell to the floor. The demon leaned intimately close.

"Choosing to forget is pretty cowardly," he said. "If you'd picked the larger life, I might have let you live it. Though I'm still pretty pissed about you hitting me."

Before his eyes, her hair turned gray, then white, then fell out.

"Your faith... you have no idea how powerful it is, do you? How delicious. Maybe you have some inkling now, as you lose it. Yes, Lucifer means less and less now, mm? Just like everything else."

She croaked at him, but couldn't really speak, couldn't move except to curl tighter into a fetal position. Leaving the world in the same shape she'd entered it.

"And here you get the future that awaits you humans all. On somber reflection, I think I'd have killed you whatever you chose. Otherwise, you might have let someone know you got the drop on me. Too embarrassing."

She didn't answer. She was dead.

He put the gun on the floor, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his fingerprints off it. Then he stood and dusted off his hands.

He was tired, but happy. The Darkness had part of his Name and was presumably insane with rage—but who knew when Joriel would get another chance to incarnate? Edasul had been delicious. If no one had grabbed it, there was a lot of money in the trunk of Morrison's car. And the mortal, the anonymous woman who believed so sadly, so fully... she made the whole trip worthwhile.

"Now where's my briefcase?" he wondered out loud.

She Kindly Stopped for Me

Diane Piron-Gelman

Because I could not stop for Death–

He kindly stopped for me–

–Emily Dickinson

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas / Let your heart be light / From now on, our troubles will be out of sight..."

Linnea Pohl cupped her hands more tightly around her coffee cup. Her fingers had long since absorbed all the heat in it. She considered asking the waitress for a warm-up but decided it was too much trouble to deal with another human being. Instead, she picked up the nearest quarter of her turkey and bacon club sandwich. The white mark in the top slice of toast where she'd taken a single bite out of it–how many ages ago?–contrasted sharply with its golden-brown surface. She stared at the sandwich, mesmerized, for several seconds before dropping it untasted back to the plate. Why had she thought food would be any damned help?

The Christmas carol went on, syrupy and sickening. She'd never liked it. Or the movie it came from. The sound system in the all-night diner kept spilling it at her, clear and penetrating as Dolby stereo. That voice, that Judy Garland warble overflowing with fake pathos. A show of sadness put on for the camera. All because a fictional happy family had to pick up house and move in 1890-something.

"Big fucking deal," Linnea muttered to the cooling brown sludge in her cup. A stocky cop in his fifties at the booth across the way gave her a look. She ignored him, instead concentrating on a chip in the cup's rim. What the hell did Judy know about real pain? Linnea knew what real pain was. She'd been drowning in it since 7:00 p.m.

Since her little sister had asked to die.

The cup clattered against the saucer as she pressed her hands to her forehead. Tiny blood vessels pulsed against the skin, throbbing like that damned voice over the ceiling speaker. She must be sitting right under it. If she had a gun, like that cop, she'd shoot the thing out. Shoot out every speaker in the goddamned diner, and to hell with what the cop thought. Then maybe she'd turn it on herself for good measure. At least that way she'd go first.

"Damn you, Julie," she whispered past a lump in her throat that burned like a red-hot golf ball. *Strep throat, possible symptom,* the doctor in her noted automatically. "I can't do this. You know I can't do this."

"You all right, ma'am?"

Looking up was like lifting a twenty-pound weight. The cop was standing by her table. The expression on his face combined wariness and concern, as if he wanted to offer help but was too used to dealing with hardasses to have any idea how. He had a beer paunch and a bad comb-over hiding his bald spot. Like Dad, dead from liver damage six months before the LA quake. Before Julie went into the hospital and never came out. Not that Dad would've cared. Lucky bastard.

She glanced downward, past the cop's plump chin and neck to his dark blue shirt. His badge glittered against the fabric, harshly bright.

"Po-lice officer," she said, pointedly pronouncing each syllable. "And who are you policing at the moment?"

"Ma'am?"

"Who's your target? Your perp? Or do you call us civvies something else these days?"

His jaw jutted out as he drew himself up. One hand went to the butt of his gun. "I think you should leave now, ma'am."

"Or what? You'll haul me away?" Her sour laugh held no mirth. "Jesus Christ. A city still full of rioters and looters, and you've got nothing better to do?!"

"Now you listen here—"

"Fuck off."

The rational part of her brain, the one that normally handled her patient schedule and picking up the dry cleaning and the endless changes in Julie's treatment over the past half-year, suggested that swearing at an armed member of LA's finest was not the wisest move to make. At the moment, though, she didn't care. Getting hauled downtown and tossed into a holding cell might be an improvement. At least then she'd have physical miseries to distract her from mental hell. She gave the cop her best attack-dog glare, an expression culled from memories of the adolescent punk she'd once been. What she'd give to be nineteen again. No, not nineteen. That had been her last year in hell. *Their* last year in hell, hers and Julie's. She'd love to be twenty, on her own with Julie in the first cramped apartment they'd shared. Free of the stink of vodka and whiskey and breath mints that never masked it when Mom or Dad spoke. Free of the constant shouting and fist-through-the-wall fights. Free of the silences that followed while Dad slept it off and Mom got steadily more pickled in her favorite living-room chair. Working hard at pre-med and a student-aid job, but happy for the first time since she could remember. She and Julie, together against the world.

Her nose stung. She broke off the staring contest with the cop and slumped against the back of the booth. "Leave me alone."

She knew he was looking at her. She kept her eyes down so she wouldn't see the pity on his tough-guy face. After what felt like endless seconds, she heard the muffled creak of his shoes as he walked away.

She took a sip of coffee, just to have something to do. It tasted like cold-brewed tree bark. As bad as the hospital coffee, which was the color of mushroom dirt and the flavor of paper lunch bags. Julie had joked about it, when Linnea came to visit during her first stay. "Chateau de brown bag, Our Lady of Mercy's own special house blend. Puts hair on your chest, but only if you drink three pots." They'd both laughed harder than the joke deserved, mainly to remind each other that they still could. Julie always had been able to make her laugh.

Linnea picked up a French fry and drew patterns with it in the scattered salt on her plate. Circle, spiral, triangle. The motions kept the memories at bay for a while, but she knew they were there. They hovered at the edges of her mind, pressing, insistent. Determined to break free. After a minute she dropped the fry, rested her head in her hands, and let the memories come.

Five and a half years old, watching the new baby squirm and burble in the corner of their old flowered couch. Mom was asleep, Dad out of the house. For a little while, she and the baby were safe. "Julie," she'd said softly, and held out a finger to make the baby grab it. Tiny fingers hooked around her big-girl one. *My baby*, she'd thought then. Like the best kind of new doll, because it could do things back. Not many things yet, but the baby would learn. She'd teach it everything. How to play games, give hugs, eat ice cream. How to go down the slide backward and jump off the swings.

How to be invisible when the big glass bottles of Bad Stuff came out.

The music changed to the opening chords of *The First Noël*. Linnea saw herself and Julie, sitting at the top of the stairs on Christmas morning. 6:00 a.m., waiting for seven. Seven o'clock was the magic hour, when they were allowed to go down and dump out their stockings as long as they didn't make too much noise. Noise was the cardinal sin in the Pohl household. Especially early morning noise after a long night with the bottle.

Most years, the Christmas pickings were slim. But the presents didn't matter. In that hour before sunrise, the only thing that mattered was Julie, huddled for warmth beside her under that striped blanket, the two of them talking low about anything and everything. Linnea'd been ten years old then, maybe eleven. Julie was barely in kindergarten.

"Linnie, where does God live?"

"Everywhere. That's what Father John says."

"No, I mean where's His house. Does He have one?"

"Father John would say it's the church."

"Our church? St. Anne's?"

Shrug. "I guess so."

"So then how can He have a birthday?"

"Father John?"

"No, silly. God."

"What do you mean?"

"St. Anne's doesn't have a kitchen. If God doesn't have a kitchen, how can He bake a birthday cake? If you don't have a cake, it's not a real birthday. So how can Christmas be His birthday if He lives at St. Anne's?"

She'd wanted to laugh, but Julie looked so serious. She couldn't toss off a flip remark to that face. So she said the first thing that came into her head. "The angels make it for Him. In the rectory kitchen." A total lie, but it would take away Julie's troubled look. A few years in purgatory were a small price to pay for that. "God can't make His own cake. I mean, He could, but that'd be cheating. So the angels make it with angel magic. Like Sister Frances says our guardian angels have, to help them keep us safe."

"Oh." Julie snuggled closer. "Will I know everything about God and stuff when I'm as big as you?"

"Yup." She gave Julie's thin shoulders a squeeze and blinked hard against suddenly hot eyes. Another lie. She was so scared most of the time, she just wanted to run a million miles away. But Julie needed her. She had to be strong and brave. Nobody else would do it. Not the guardian angels Sister Frances always blabbed on about, and sure as *hell* not God. God wasn't paying *attention*. Or maybe He just didn't care.

The smell of frying onion rings yanked her back to the diner. Their greasy odor made her stomach heave. She scrabbled in her coat pocket for the wad of bills she usually carried there, extracted a ten-spot, tossed it on the table and lurched out of the booth. No one paid her the slightest heed as she stumbled toward the door. The night beckoned, a chilly fifty-ish, unusual for LA but clean and bracing.

Outside, she breathed deep, then sagged against the wall as fatigue struck. Cold from the whitewashed stone seeped into her back. Where in hell's name was she supposed to go now? Back to the hospital? Home to her empty apartment? She pushed away from the building and stumbled down the street. One foot, then the other, shaky at first but gathering strength as the city blocks melted away beneath her feet. In this part of town, the sidewalks were still intact. She'd walked a long time after leaving Julie, long enough to think she might be hungry and hit the first diner she saw. She wondered how far she was now from the quake zone.

The wind began to pick up, tossing her hair and toying with the hem of her raincoat. She shivered in a sudden gust. *Bad week to take out the lining,* she thought. Who knew it would get so cold in LA? But then, everything had been crazy in the weeks since the quake. Landmark buildings crumbled to dust, familiar streets ripped to rubble, friends and neighbors dead or missing. These days it wasn't only the half-crazy street preachers who walked around shouting about the end of the world being nigh. Especially after what the local networks had swiftly dubbed "the Visitation." She remembered seeing it on the news—trembling, staticky footage of something bright and vast, like a column of flames in the vague shape of angel wings. And a sound picked up by some intrepid newsman's microphone—a deep-throated roar she'd felt through her feet even over the TV set, like the howling wind of a tornado combined with the shrieks of the damned.

Afterward, people had flocked to the churches that were still standing and mobbed the aid stations that had been set up in the worst-hit neighborhoods. She'd spent three solid days in one of those herself, doling out emergency first aid and what little comfort she could offer until she passed out from sheer exhaustion on the dispensary floor. They'd sent her home after that, but she couldn't relax enough to get the sleep she so desperately needed. So she'd gone to Julie instead, to sit vigil beside her bed at Our Lady of Mercy. The hospital building had remained miraculously intact. At the time, she'd seen it as a good omen. The guardian angels were real; God did care. He'd just been a little busy, was all. Then came Julie's second stroke, the one that had deadened her whole left side. She ate mostly through a straw now, her slack mouth barely able to handle anything solid. The effort to regain half-intelligible speech had cost her weeks of exhausting struggle, and still only Linnea could consistently understand her. The doctors offered little hope of progress, not while the kidney disease ravaged the strength she would need to recover. No wonder she wanted to die.

"You bastard," Linnea muttered to the night sky. Stars shone in it, courtesy of the thousands of missing streetlights downed by the quake. Sister Frances had told her once that the stars were the eyes of Our Lord, watching over the world His Holy Father had made. Bullshit. If God was looking down at all, His gaze was as cold and distant as those white pinpoints millions of light-years away. "You can't fucking be bothered, can you? You make us be born, you put us here, and then you just up and fucking leave us to our own devices. To hell with that. I don't believe in you anymore. And you know what? If that really was the Devil who showed up awhile back, I'd sell him my soul just to spite you. Because at least he'd make Julie get well. Payment for payment. Not like you, who takes all our love and trust and gives us nothing in return. So screw you, buddy. I'm done."

She stood on the street corner for a moment, glaring upward as if she expected the stars to answer her. Silence was the only response, accompanied by a fresh gust of cold wind that made her eyes tear. The temperature was heading lower and her thin raincoat wasn't much of a barrier to the unseasonable chill. She huddled deeper inside it and struck out in a random direction. God was dead, Julie was dying, and the only thing that mattered now was the hollow clop of her boots on the cracked pavement.

The cracks soon gave way to holes, which in turn gave way to jagged gaps and upthrust chunks of concrete. Most she could step over, but some she had to jump. She'd reached the edge of the quake zone. *Time to turn around,* she thought, but her feet kept bearing her forward. She yelped as she barked her shin against a hunk of sidewalk. She bent to rub the bruised spot, then straightened up and caught the glow of neon amid a row of darkened shop fronts. Unlike its dilapidated neighbors, this small building still had four walls and a roof. The cherry-red sign read *Mike's Liquors,* with *OPEN* below it in acid green neon.

A mirthless laugh escaped her. The only intact building on the strip and it had to be a liquor store.

"Speak of the devil," she muttered.

* * *

Suriel could feel the cold.

Or rather, the body she presently inhabited could feel it. Couldn't stop feeling it, in fact. She was running out of strength, her reserves depleted by the constant need to keep three steps ahead of the Earthbound. Those ancient demons had made the City of Angels their personal playground, and woe betide any newly freed fallen angel who chose to flout their power.

But then, neither Suriel nor the woman-child whose catatonic shell she'd appropriated had ever been much for obeying Authority.

She staggered down the rubble-strewn remnants of a sidewalk, then wavered into the side of an overturned car. They littered the streets of the quake zone, battered metal monsters crouched amid chunks of pavement and building stone. Bright moonlight showed her the shadow of her own reflection in a curving section of what had once been a fender. Pointed features, punked-out hair, multiple ear-piercings and a feral grin, conjured up despite her situation by the thought of her own daring. She'd lasted nearly seven weeks against the Earthbound, an eternity in Hell before that. She'd find a way to keep going. The Most High who had imprisoned her, the Princes of Hell who thought to use her as their tool, and most of all the Morningstar, who had inspired and then abandoned her... none of these had destroyed her yet. She swore nothing would. Out of the Abyss, free to resume her sacred calling for the first time in millennia, Suriel had no intention of throwing away this unprecedented opportunity.

But she felt so weak. She leaned against the car, breathing deeply, as if pulling more oxygen into her host's lungs would provide her with the sustenance she craved. A memory rose from her recently acquired human brain—a line of white powder on a glass tabletop, fingers clutching a straw, whole body trembling with the same intense need. Then the deep inhalation, the fine spray of powder against the inside of her nose, followed by a rush of well-being as overwhelming as the desire it satisfied. Suriel rode the memory until it faded, then wrenched her attention back to the business at hand. She needed to find a believer. Soon, before she lost the power to keep hidden from the Earthbound. Desperation nibbled at her. Mortals were thinner on the ground these days—most of those not killed in the quake or the subsequent riots had fled soon afterward for the few greener pastures that still existed. What soul could she hope to find here of any lasting worth?

A flare of anger marshaled her remaining strength. Fear had no place in the mind of a Slayer, a Demon of the Seventh House. *I banish fear—or bring it, as the dying may deserve.* Deep within her, a similar anger echoed in the remnants of her host's psyche. Rafaella Li, Rafe for most of her seventeen years, had also hated being afraid. She had raged against her brief life, against her inability to escape, and most of all against herself, for feeling small and worthless. The paradox of such anger contained within such a fragile soul had drawn Suriel to her.

Enough time-wasting. Suriel cast her awareness as widely as she thought her host body could manage to walk.

Any believer much farther away than that might as well be on the moon. With the streets torn to shreds by the quake and still more destruction wrought by the burning and looting that followed, no city bus or cab was likely to come anywhere near her tonight. It was hoof it or nothing.

First she scented the city itself, a dead brown-black smell like the odor of scorched bone. The stench brought a taste with it, brackish and bitter. A part of her marveled at the strangeness of near-infinite demon awareness filtered through the finite sensory organs of this damaged mortal girl. Scent and taste were her guides now—a single, physical reality to hold a consciousness that had once spanned multiple layers of being. The thought made her want to weep. Another bad sign. Her strength was truly flagging now, if she could be so easily distracted from the hunt.

Where was it, the scent she sought? Over the dead reek of the concrete canyons and asphalt walkways lay another odor, musty and heavy and sickly yellow. The smell of despair, of sorrow and fear and anger so dulled by hopelessness that only the slightest spark of life remained. Hell would have smelled like this to Rafe. Now the smell belonged to the folk of Los Angeles, bent under the dreadful weight of their own indifference. Here and there beneath the murk lay sharper tastes and scents: the peppery bite of raw anger, the rich cinnamon of mother love, the bright green tang of hope. Close to hand, however, there was little of any promise. Rafe's nose crinkled at the chemical bite of whiskey—a sodden drunk, three blocks away, dreaming of angel hosts in the voice of a long-dead mother. *Swing low, sweet chariot / Coming for to carry me home...* Show him a real angel and he'd believe, if only for a moment. Just long enough to give her another few hours' sustenance, before his pickled brain let the wonder fall out of it like a precious artifact out of a clumsy child's hand. Then she'd be right back where she was, scrounging the streets for the next scrap of watered-down human faith.

She shivered, then shoved herself away from the car. There had to be a better alternative somewhere in this city. She was tired of snagging tidbits, tired of living off of just enough strength to hunt and go to ground. The drunk would do for now. And then she'd find something better. Something befitting the power and glory of an Angel of Death.

* * *

The neck of the bottle, securely wrapped in a brown paper bag, felt bizarrely comforting in Linnea's hand. She still couldn't believe she'd bought it. At least she'd had the sense to avoid the really cheap stuff. A fifth of Chivas should work every bit as well for her as it had for her parents, without the rotgut afterward. If there was an afterward, which she didn't care much about just now. Besides, there was a symmetry to drowning her sorrows in the same poison so beloved by dear old Mom and Dad.

She stumbled over a gap in the concrete and caught herself against a hunk of unidentifiable rock. A piece of building facade, she decided upon a closer look. It was off-white and nubbly, with whorls in it that suggested fleurs-de-lis. Or maybe the ragged edges of angel wings. She laughed at that, the sound echoing crazily back at her from the shadows. "Are you my guardian angel, by any chance? Because I've got to tell you, you're pretty damned late. In fact, you're so fucking late, you're fired."

God, she sounded drunk already and she hadn't even opened the bottle. Hadn't found the right place to drink it. She'd know when she saw it. Somewhere in the quake zone, for sure. The zone looked like she felt. Battered, shattered, raw and bleeding and burned. Like the bottle, the devastation was strangely comforting. The outside world mirrored her inner one, and that was as it should be.

Her foot crunched on something. A glass shard winked up at her in the moonlight. She looked around. The sidewalks and streets, or what passed for them hereabouts, glittered with broken glass for as far as she could see. Kristallnacht must have looked like this, only without the twisted steel frames of once-proud skyscrapers rearing up against the sky like some sort of alien jungle foliage. Far ahead, near the end of the block, a rippling darkness in midstreet warned of a major hole. Best watch her step from now on. No sense falling down a crevasse in the pavement before she'd had at least one drink.

She picked her way across the field of glass, turning obliquely to avoid the giant crack whose edge she'd glimpsed. A relatively intact stretch of road beckoned eastward. Half-collapsed residential buildings lined her new route, mostly hacienda-style condos interspersed with the occasional single-family home. A ritzy neighborhood before all hell broke loose. Those walls still standing hinted at graceful lines and large expanses, and jagged hunks of masonry shared the street with shards of expensive terra-cotta roof tiles. She bent and picked one up. It cracked between her fingers. She pressed the fragments to her nose and inhaled the fragrance of the red-brown, sunbaked dust. A childhood memory surfaced—herself at twelve, showing seven-year-old Julie how to pat down potting soil over a baby chiflara plant in a terra-cotta pot. By the time she'd left for college, promising to come back for Julie in a month, the chiflara had towered over her head.

The plant was dead when she came back, snapped in half by a swung chair during one of her father's drunken rages. "Better the plant than me," Julie had said later, trying to laugh about it, but Linnea could hear in her voice how much those flippant words had cost her.

She lurched to her feet. The bottle bobbled dangerously in the crook of her arm. She tightened her grip, suddenly terrified of losing her sole source of oblivion. Nothing else would be available tonight. The quake and then the riots had driven away the corner coke dealers, at least temporarily, even if she'd had the money to score. The bottle was better, anyway. More appropriate. If she was going to jump off the wagon after damned near twenty years, she'd prefer to start with the devil she knew best and loathed most. She'd spent almost her entire adulthood fleeing alcohol, running as fast as she could from the intimate demon that had made their home life a travesty and had once come close to killing her. Tonight it was time to face the demon down. If she could manage that, maybe she could finally face what Julie had asked her to do. Or else she'd be so far gone that it wouldn't matter anymore.

All she needed was the right place for the confrontation.

The bent outlines of a wrought-iron fence came into view halfway down the block. Beyond them, Linnea saw a line of small, irregular hills, interspersed with upended benches and overturned playground equipment. The local park. Perfect.

She staggered toward it, the whiskey bottle held tight against her coat.

* * *

In the darkness of the narrow alley, Suriel rose and brushed grit from her knees. The crumpled body of the wino lay at her feet. Fleeting and shallow though it was, his mingled terror and wonder had given her sufficient sustenance to continue her night's hunt. Another few like him—scraps from the city's mortal smorgasbord—would sustain her for a few days, perhaps a week. Then she would face the same dilemma all over again. Faint nausea washed through her at the thought. She had been immortal once, existing in countless dimensions of reality. How pathetic, that she should be reduced to this hand-to-mouth existence.

She steadied herself with a hand against the cold metal side of an overflowing dumpster. *No more,* she vowed. *This ends tonight.*

The odor of rotting garbage from the dumpster was overpowering. She walked away from it toward the mouth of the alley. When she reached a spot where the air smelled clearer, she sat cross-legged on the rough pavement and breathed deeply. Each slow exhalation broadened her awareness until she could scent the life-energies of the weeds that thrust upward between cracks in the sidewalks. A rush of sensation swept through her, dizzying and chaotic. Somewhere within the maelstrom was the meatier prey she sought.

There—a flicker of complex scents, a hint of rich taste on the edge of her tongue. Pepper and ammonia, burning rage and bitter despair. And underlying them both, the grassy scent of hope that refused to die. This soul was suffering, had almost convinced itself that neither God nor the world cared for its pain. But not quite.

Suriel rode the wind to her quarry, eagerly trading the cost in strength for speed. Within three heartbeats, she stood at the outskirts of a park. Convulsed earth and crazy-tilted swing sets shared space with tipped-over benches and chunks of concrete. On the support column of a drinking fountain, snapped from its base by the fury of the quake, sat a slender mortal woman with a bottle glinting in her hand.

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The whiskey burned all the way down and left a flat, metallic tang at the back of her tongue. Just the way she remembered. Back when she was twelve years old, she couldn't imagine ever wanting to taste the stuff. By the time she was fifteen, she could hardly believe she'd existed without it. "Just like dear old Dad," she muttered, then giggled. Vodka had been her mother's choice, colorless and near-flavorless stuff she could pour into anything or pass off as water. Provided no one got his or her nose close to it, of course. A stealth drink for a gutless drinker. Linnea had followed in her father's footsteps: Whiskey meant you had enough gumption to at least admit you were going to hell.

"My name is Linnea Anne Pohl," she said to the night. "Doctor Linnea Anne Pohl, MD. I've been sober for twenty years and three days."

The nubbly stone of her perch felt cold beneath her thighs. She took another swig. Liquid heat carved a path down her innards. Suddenly she was eighteen again, driving too fast down quiet residential streets, windows open and radio cranked as she jiggled in the seat to the beat of *Brown-Eyed Girl*. One hand on the wheel, the other on the bottle, tossing back slug after slug between lines of song. Poor Julie, missing a ride in the magic chariot. Little prissy-assed sister, too scared to go out to the movies just because Linnea'd had a few drinks. "I'm good, I can handle it. Come on." Laughing at Julie's distressed face, sure of jollying her along.

"I won't. Not with you like that." Julie's cheeks pinking on top, the way they always did when she was upset.

"Like what, little sis?" Teasing, one arm reaching out to tousle Julie's hair.

Julie had stepped away, big and deliberate. "Like Dad and Mom. You're so fucking drunk, if I touched you, you'd fall down."

The obscenity on those twelve-year-old lips had shocked her into immobility. Then had come a fury so sweeping and total, it took her by surprise. She'd picked up the nearest thing to hand—Julie's glass turtle bank, a cherished memento of a long-ago trip to West Virginia—and hurled it against the wall. "You little bitch! Who died and made you God?! Fuck you—stay with them if you want. I'm gone."

She'd driven for a solid hour, too furious to sit in a movie theatre and focus on the antics of the latest box-office draw. A stop at Binny's Liquors calmed her somewhat, as she calculated the differing prices of poisons against the folded bills in her jeans pocket. Then a long walk down the bicycle path by the lagoon, punctuated by the rough bite of Canadian Mist. By the time she was ready to drive home and forgive all, more than half the new bottle was gone. But she was no drunk like her godforsaken excuses for parents. She could handle her liquor. That was why she'd started drinking in the first place. To prove she could.

And then the second car shattered the quiet night along with her passenger-side door. She remembered the strains of the radio mingling with the sounds of breaking glass and screaming brakes, then silence and darkness for a very long time.

The first thing she saw on waking was Julie's face, twisted with the effort not to bawl like a baby. "Please, Linnie, don't die. Don't leave me alone with them."

Julie would have died that night, she'd realized later when she finally saw the totaled car. The passenger space no longer existed. Linnea's broken ribs and other injuries had come from being pinned against the driver-side door by the crumpled opposite half of the vehicle.

She knew she was a drunk after that. She knew her sister's life was a gift from Heaven, the one freebie you sometimes get when God decides He's feeling patient enough to bother teaching you a lesson. And now the Big Bastard was going to take it away. "What, I didn't learn well enough? I haven't been a good enough girl? Twenty years clean and sober, you asshole! Wasn't that enough, that you have to punish me some more? All I ever asked you to do was make it so she wouldn't suffer. Make her well, was what I meant. Not this." Her voice cracked on the last word. "God, anything but this."

The bottle slid in her hands and thunked on the concrete column. She tightened her grip before it could fall all the way to the ground.

"Nice catch," said a stranger's voice. Young, female, startlingly close. "I could use some, if you're sharing."

Silently, Linnea passed the bottle over. The hand that took it was small and slender, the skin reddened and rough around bitten nails. A coiled serpent ring half-covered the pinkie. Linnea's gaze followed the hand up the sweat-jacketed arm until she could take in the stranger as a whole. Sharp-edged haircut, glossy and dark, chin-length on one side and shaved above the ear on the other. Multiple ear-piercings traced a line from tip to lobe. A face all lines and angles. Narrow shoulders, sloping posture. Pants that looked painted on, with a sheen in the moonlight that suggested leather. Strap-on shoes with big block heels. They looked like weights at the ends of her thin legs.

"When was the last time you ate something?" Linnea blurted.

The girl shrugged. "Little while ago. I'm good, thanks." She passed the bottle back. "Rafe."

"Linnea." The response came automatically, even as a portion of her tired brain registered incredulity that she was exchanging social pleasantries in a ruined tot lot with a street waif. The bottle felt reassuringly solid in her fingers, a counterweight to the surreal situation.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise."

Several minutes passed in silence, broken only by the crackle of paper as the bottle went back and forth.

"I used to live here," Rafe said. She gestured with her head toward a distant building, now only half standing. "Condo over there. Third floor. My sister's place."

"What happened?"

"Annie died." One thin shoulder moved upward in a shrug. "She was sleeping when the building collapsed."

"I'm sorry." Linnea's eyes brimmed. Poor girl, to lose home and family in one blow like that. It was so unfair. She swallowed hard against the impulse to bawl. Liquor and exhaustion were crumbling her defenses, eating away like acid at the armor around her heart. She stood up abruptly and rooted in her pockets for a Kleenex. If she gave way now, she would drown in grief and never surface again.

"So what's your story?" Rafe said.

It all came pouring out then, a flood of words punctuated by gulps and cracked sobs. Julie's illness and pain. Their long, horrible childhood, made bearable only by each other. The good years after they'd left home. Her own messed-up adult life, with her work and her sister as the only bright spots. Somewhere in the midst of the deluge, she looked into her companion's eyes and felt as if she were falling down a hole in the middle of the world. Stranger still, the feeling seemed completely natural.

"I'm an oncologist," she said to those ageless depths. "A cancer doctor. I work with terminal patients all the time. I know people die. I know I can't always save them. I should be able to handle this. But I can't. I can't watch her suffer any more, and I can't let her go. And I for damned sure can't save her." The taste of failure was like ash in her mouth. "She has kidney disease. Plus three strokes, courtesy of a congenital blood condition she inherited from mommy dearest. Not my areas of expertise." She took another swig from the bottle, fast and hard and angry. "Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to be a high-powered specialist, medical knowledge coming out my ears, and not a scrap of it is any damned use? I'm a civilian in this fight. I nag the nephrologist, hunt down new treatments that I can't force anybody to try, troll for miracle cures on the fucking Internet. I beg for information by the hour. Did she sleep, did she eat, how many cc's of Demerol did she need today? Then I go in there, with her, and do the happy act for a couple of hours until we're both so sick of it we can barely look each other in the face." She tossed back another mouthful of whiskey. "She asked me to let her die tonight. How's that for a Christmas present? 'What do you want for Christmas,' I said. Like she gave a flying fuck, like everything was normal. So she told me."

"That's rough." Rafe's voice was quiet, accepting.

"Yeah."

Silence fell again, so profound that Linnea could hear her own heartbeat. She felt hollow, as if after a long bout kneeling by the porcelain throne. The outriders of a major headache were nagging at her, but for the moment the discomfort was bearable. Welcome, even. Anything to distract her from the decision she had to make.

"Do you believe in miracles?" Rafe again. Offhand, as if it hardly mattered.

Linnea raised her head and looked Rafe in the face. "Show me one and I'll tell you."

Rafe smiled and took Linnea's hand. Then she spoke—a word Linnea had never heard before, whose sound made her bones crawl.

Vertigo struck, in a million spinning colors. Linnea tried to stand, but the ground had vanished. The only solid reality was Rafe's fingers gripping hers. All else was madness. Nightmare shapes flew past, saw her, gathered round and grabbed at her with half-substantial fingers of sickly colored mist. Black-shot crimson for rage, grayed yellow for despair, a churning darkness she couldn't assign a shade to that tore through her brain in a blaze of hatred. Along with the emotions came voices. Thousands of them gibbered in her ears, a crazed symphony of screams, shouts and hissing whispers. She cried out in terror, then fell to her knees.

They met solid floor. Off-white linoleum, as familiar as the sight of her own hands splayed against it. No more colors. No more shrieking of the damned. Just the hard floor beneath her and a sense of blessed quiet.

Soft sounds invaded her consciousness, also familiar—the muted beep of a blood-pressure monitor and the muffled sucking of a respirator. She sagged back on her heels and looked around. They were in Julie's room, herself kneeling near the half-raised bed and Rafe perched on the edge of the foam visitors' chair.

"How did—what..." She was too disoriented to make words.

"You wanted a miracle." Rafe smiled, and the dim room seemed to brighten.

"Not much of one, I'll grant you. Any comic-book superhero could pull it off. Or something like it. But I thought it might do for starters."

"This is real." The statement was half a question.

"Yes."

"Are you..." Linnea halted in confusion. A thousand questions whirled through her brain. Through the chaos came the long-ago voice of Sister Frances, prattling on about guardian angels.

"Not exactly." Rafe seemed to have read her mind. "But I am what you need right now." The street girl rose and crossed the room in a single, fluid motion. Linnea found herself straining to hear the soft flutter of angel wings.

Slight though she was, Rafe seemed to loom over the wasted shape in the bed. One finger traced a line from Julie's cheek to the tip of her chin. Then she held her hand over Julie's throat.

Light from the monitor glinted off of the silver serpent ring. Rafe's hand began to glow with the same silvery light. The luminescence spread until it covered Julie from head to foot. Linnea watched as if half-asleep, her mind slowed to the consistency of molasses. She could see straight through her sister's body, sinew and muscle and blood and bone. The outlines of each cell wall glowed in the dim room, an unhealthy yellow mottled with brown and black. She recoiled from the colors, but then forced herself to keep watching. Rafe would change them. Her street waif guardian angel would heal Julie. She had the power. She had found Linnea on this night of all nights, for just that purpose.

The ambient light seemed to flicker as the silver glow intensified. Where it met Julie's aura, it flared white and then faded, from silver to dull gray to black. A black far beyond the mere color, so intensely absent that it drew the eye as a missing tooth draws the tongue. Linnea froze in horror. A silent scream echoed through her head, but no sound passed her lips.

The angel was killing Julie. Murdering her little sister. Only Linnea could stop her—but her muscles wouldn't function, her vocal chords were ice, her mind suspended in time. There was no chance, no hope, no prayer. Only this terrible moment, stretched out for eternity.

Rafe's hand dropped away from Julie's neck. "Watch," she whispered. Beneath the soft word, Linnea heard the echo of a thousand voices.

From the black hole that was Julie, a mist began to rise. Colors shifted through it as it coalesced, rose and green and gold and blue. The shimmering rainbow ball rose higher, then floated toward Linnea. Acting on instinct, she held out her hand. The light sphere rested briefly in her cupped palm. It felt like a handclasp, familiar, beloved.

"Julie," she murmured. Her voice caught on the name. "Holy God, *Julie*."

The ball rose and brushed her forehead. Sensations swept through her, too fast to process. The dizzy delight of a toddler being swung in circles at arm's length, her own grinning seven-year-old face at the center of the spinning world. Warm weight against her back in the dark while her own voice read *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in hushed tones. The scents of chicken stir-fry. The shaky refuge of an embrace while parental shouts raged downstairs. The window-garden they'd planted during the first spring of their independence. Love, courage, regret. And above all, an exquisite sense of release. The prison bars had vanished, the pain-wracked body no longer held what had so desperately wished to be free. Julie's departing soul swept Linnea up in its joy, banishing the horror that had gripped her moments before.

She understood now. Not a guardian angel. A different kind of being. The one she and Julie had both needed, only she'd been too stubborn to recognize it.

She turned toward Rafe. The street girl was there, looking small and insubstantial. Behind and around her Linnea saw the towering shadows of wings, dark and shimmering, as if torn from the fabric of space. The same glittering blackness, dotted with whirling stars, shone from Rafe's eyes. It beckoned Linnea like the glassy surface of an untouched pool at midnight. More than anything, she wanted to explore the depths beneath. She reached out to touch the darkly glowing shape of stars...

... and then let her hand fall in confusion as the vision melted away. No shape of night, no wings, no hidden depths to plumb. Just skinny punked-out Rafe leaning against Julie's hospital bed.

She looked around for the rainbow sphere, but it had vanished too. There was only Julie, her sleeping face marked with pain that even the Demerol couldn't reach. The sucking hiss of the respirator and the subdued beep of the monitor sounded shockingly loud in the silence.

"She's still alive." Linnea heard her own words as if from miles away.

"Yes."

"But she—but you—" Her blood was roaring in her ears. She stared at the herringbone pattern in the carpet, as if memorizing it would bring the world into focus. "It was real. What I saw. It was real."

"It can be." Rafe tilted her head to one side and gave Linnea a measuring look. "But only if you truly desire the vision you saw. I cannot set her free unless you ask."

Slowly, Linnea lifted her head. "I'm asking."

"It must be done through you," Rafe said. "Only you have the right."

"What... what do I do?"

"Hold her in your arms, with one hand here." Rafe touched Linnea's throat just over the larynx. With the contact came a sudden, sharp, not-quite-burning smell, like the scent of the air just before lightning strikes. She felt bereft when Rafe's hand dropped away. Moving as if through waist-deep water, she walked to the bed, sat down on the edge and lifted Julie's upper body to rest against her own.

"Close your eyes," Rafe murmured. Linnea felt suspended in space. Then there was no more thought, only sensation. Tingling skin gave way to white heat, a burning so sudden and swift she had no time to cry out. Then the terrible heat was gone, displaced by blessedly cool mist. The scent of rain surrounded her—the smell of easing, relief, release. She opened her eyes and looked in wonder at the silver light that poured from her hand. The light enveloped her sister's body, enshrouded it, and then gave way to blackness as it gently severed the last connections between suffering flesh and spirit. Then the rainbow came, mist and sphere. The colors danced as they rose higher. The ceiling seemed to vanish, or perhaps it was angelic vision that allowed Linnea to watch until the rainbow disappeared amid the stars.

"Goodbye, Julie," she breathed. Tears ran in wet trails down her cheeks, but she made no move to wipe them away.

The beeping of the blood-pressure monitor, suddenly rapid and shrill, snapped her back to reality. She stared down at her sister's face. Julie's features were slack, empty. As empty as the hollow in her heart where her little sister had once been.

She laid the body against the crumpled pillowcase, then slid to her knees and curled in on herself in a futile attempt to hold the void at bay. Grief too terrible to face lurked at the edges of the vast gray space where she'd once had a heart and a soul. She was a dead woman walking, a shell, a husk of a human being.

No, came a whisper in her mind. A voice full of compassion, as deep and boundless as the ocean. *I am here. I will always be here.*

She turned blindly toward the voice, arms out to clutch whatever might be there. Dark wings made of stars enveloped her in a mother's protecting embrace.

* * *

The scent of Linnea's hair was intoxicating. Suriel reveled in it and other unfamiliar human sensations: the silky softness of the hair beneath her cheek, the warm weight of the woman's heaving body in her arms. She held her newborn believer close, dizzied by the realization that she could assuage this grief. After eons in the Abyss, she could finally relieve suffering instead of merely being doomed to share it. Linnea's raging emotions washed through her, buoyed her and sent her strength surging. She felt the hot burn of anguish, the sweat-stink of terror, the cold bitter ash smell of being forever alone. And beneath all that, the scent and taste that Suriel found most precious—the clear green freshness of faith and hope.

She drank them all in like parched earth absorbs water. No gift could be too much recompense for the mortal woman who had given her this. She brushed her lips across Linnea's head in blessing.

I am here, she murmured. She knew Linnea could hear her, though she made no sound. *I will always be here. You're mine now. I'll take care of you. Of everything. Forever and ever and ever.*

I am Death, and I am eternal.

A LEGITIMATE OBLIGATION

CARL BOWEN

I

The rain started just as my cab from LAX dropped me off. The sun had gone down an hour ago, and the bright lights of the City of Angels in the distance painted the smog and the clouds overhead with their sickly glow. Except for the earthquakes, I thought, this place wasn't any different from Jersey or New York City. Sure, it was brighter and the people were richer, but it was no less a sinkhole for selfish, stuck-up bastards who wanted to make names for themselves and feel like they're on top of the world. It was just the kind of place the Devil would go to sit back and laugh at the world he'd created.

That ain't to say that this house the cab dropped me off at was any great shakes. It was a yellow split-level place in a suburb outlying LA proper. It had a tiny lawn of tall, weedy grass, and it was crammed in between two other places just like it. I pulled down the brim of my hat, turned up my jacket's collar and headed for the porch. I rang the doorbell. There was no awning or anything, so I just stood there getting drenched until the light finally came on. When it did, the door opened a few inches and half a face appeared in the gap. It was a woman, about forty or so years old with black hair and blue eyes. She looked up at me, chewing on her bottom lip.

"You Sylvia Sphener from New Jersey?" I asked her over the rain. It was really loud, coming right down on my hat like it was. "Formerly Sylvia Macellaio?"

"Yes," Sylvia said, narrowing her eyes. "Who are you?"

"Harvey," I said automatically, even though it was only half true.

"Harvey who?"

"That ain't important. How''bout letting me in before I catch pneumonia?"

Granted, I don't look like much, even on the best of days, so it didn't surprise me that Sylvia hesitated. My bodyin's about thirty pounds overweight, my shoulders slump, and the suit under my jacket hadn't been cleaned or pressed even before I'd boarded my cross-country flight to LA earlier that day. Add in the fact that I was getting pissed and the weather was shitty, and you could say I was asking a lot of her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want to talk to you about your daughter," I said. "Your brother Sal sent me."

"Sal? What does he—"

"Let me in," I growled, "and I'll tell you all about it."

The suspicion on her face turned entirely to confusion, but she finally got out of my way. I pushed the door open and followed her up the steps into her living room. I draped my sopping-wet coat over the banister rail and set down my bag but kept my hat and black plastic sunglasses on. Cold water rolled down the back of my collar, but better that than dealing with the look on Sylvia's face if I took the hat and glasses off. She could already see some of the scar on my forehead—the scar from the nine-millimeter bullet that'd punched a hole in my skull—but I didn't want to give her the whole thing to gawk at.

"Do you want to sit down?" Sylvia said, backing halfway into her kitchen while I stood at the head of the stairs. "Want some tea or anything?"

"*Tea?* Do I look like a faggot to you?"

Sylvia flinched. "Coffee? I have that."

"Yeah, coffee. That's better."

I followed her into the kitchen. It was small and dingy, and dirty dishes cluttered the table. Crusty pots and pans crowded each other on the counter, and the sink was packed corner-to-corner with more of the same. The floor looked like it hadn't been swept in about a month. It made me sick just looking at it. Why can't people take care of what they have? Fucking apes.

"So you're here about Sharon, you say?" Sylvia said as she poured water into the electric coffeemaker and pressed a button. "What do you know about my daughter?"

"For starters, I know she's gone missing," I said. "I know you've been to the police, but they think she ran away. Just looking at you, I can tell you're pretty desperate because you don't think anybody's going to help you. Yeah?"

Sylvia's eyes went blank, and her mouth peeled open. "How do you know that?"

There were two answers I could have given her right then. One might have made her mine right there on the spot. It might have forged a bond between us that nobody could have broken. The other thing was the truth, though, so I went with that. Like I was going to forge an unbreakable bond with this disgusting slob.... No thanks. I got standards.

"Sal told me," I said. "In Jersey."

Sylvia's eyes went from confused to ice cold as the realization dawned on her. "You're one of Sal's goons."

"I wouldn't say that," I said. I didn't add *if I were you.*

"So how does Sal know about Sharon?" Sylvia demanded. "I haven't talked to him since his son's first communion ten years ago. Has that rat been spying on me?"

"Calm down," I said. "Your brother's got connections. He's a powerful man with a lot of friends. I know you know this."

"Yeah," Sylvia said. "Part of why I moved out here was to get away from those 'friends' of his. But I guess I can't. Just when I thought I was out, they pull me—"

"Oh, just pour the fucking coffee," I snapped. "Jesus Christ Almighty."

I felt a guilty little jolt for that, but the outburst did the trick. Sylvia shut her mouth, poured me a cup of coffee and sat back down. I took a sip from my mug, and the steam fogged up my sunglasses.

"So who *has* been spying on me for Sal?" Sylvia asked. "You?"

"Fuck no," I said. "Sal didn't even know I was alive two days ago."

"So who?"

"I didn't ask, and I don't care. All he told me was he's got eyes on you, making sure you're safe so far from home. He wants to know you're staying out of trouble."

"That sanctimonious jerk," Sylvia hissed.

I shrugged. I'd met Sal—who was I to argue?

"It don't matter how he knows. He just does. And since you didn't call to ask him for help, he wanted me to fly out here and look out for you."

Sylvia snorted and set her mug down hard on the table. Coffee slopped out over her fingers. "That prick calls" *this* looking out for me?" she said. "What's he know from staying out of trouble?"

"That ain't my department, lady." I set my own mug of coffee down. It was awful. Too bitter. "I'm just telling you what Sal told me."

"And doing what he told you to do."

"No," I said. "I told you I don't work for him. I'm only doing him a favor to square an old debt. I told him I'd do this thing for him to keep him off my back. That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that?"

I was about to give this bitch Ebola, I swear.

"Yeah, lady, just like that." I took a deep breath and unclenched my fists.

"So you want some help or not?"

Sylvia clenched her jaw, but I saw her hand trembling as she wiped her fingers on the tablecloth. I could tell how much it was hurting her not knowing where her daughter was. I could feel desperation and worry eating away at her from the inside. If she didn't have an ulcer the size of Shea Stadium dissolving her stomach lining, I was Jimmy Stewart.

Sure enough, Sylvia's shoulders slumped, and she let out a deep breath through gritted teeth. Her lip started shaking and her eyes misted. Her real feelings were starting to show through her bitchy façade. It was about time.

"You're right, I do need help," she said, sniffling and trying to swallow down a sob.

"I didn't mean to snipe at you. Please, I just don't know what else to do. My Sharon's been gone so long, and nobody will help me find her."

The whine in her voice reached out and tried to touch something buried deep inside me—a notion so deeply ingrained that people might call it instinct. It tried to tell me that people in pain deserve some kind of help, no matter who they were. But I'd grown up a lot since the last time I agreed with that load of bullshit. People didn't deserve a damned thing—they brought their pain on themselves. They always had. Hell, the scar on my forehead and my fucked-up right eye was proof enough of that. But I had a job to do, so I kept after her.

"Tell me about it then," I said. "What do you need?"

"I need my Sharon back," Sylvia said, pulling herself together at last. "If that's why you came, then please help me. I don't care who sent you, really."

In spite of all this lady's pain, I actually smiled then. If she knew anything about anything, she'd know better than to say that. But that was her problem, not mine.

* * *

After I had everything I needed from Sylvia, I took a cab to downtown LA. I was betting that hotel rooms were cheap in the vicinity, and that people probably wouldn't be lining up to get in any time soon. Three days of riots and a decent earthquake had set off a wave of paranoid hysteria here that was only now dying down. To hear the newscasters tell it, people had just gone ape-shit—worse than

Rodney King and Watts put together. They'd been out of their minds looting, fighting and wrecking everything they could get their hands on. Sure, it was all pretty tame compared to some of the shit I'd seen and done during the war, but for everyday people, it was fucking insane.

And now, after the dust had settled and the rebuilding had begun, people were seriously freaked out. Hardly anybody was hanging out on the street, and the ones who were scurried around like rats. Even the color-coded gangbangers scattered like crows whenever they heard a car coming, in case it was a wagon full of cops looking to crack some more heads.

In fact, the cops and the National Guard were the only ones out in force with any confidence. They marched around in armed packs like they were holy infantrymen. They looked like they were patrolling a war zone, but the way they fidgeted and twitched at the shadows showed they were just as scared as everybody else. They weren't out there to make the citizens feel safe, they just wanted to make sure everybody was too scared to try anything stupid.

First the federal government pussies sniffing up everybody's ass at the airport, and now this. I swear, this world was going to hell fast enough without people like me running around, thank you very much.

Anyhow, the cab dropped me off at a hotel close to the site of the riots, and I got myself a room up on the top floor. The stairway smelled like vomit and my room smelled like old sex, but the building wasn't in danger of collapse. Hell, the TV worked, the water worked, and I didn't have a crackhead squatter curled up in the corner—I counted myself lucky. I stripped off my suit and headed into the bathroom for a shower. While the water was getting hot, I took a good long look in the mirror. Of course, that ended up being a depressing mistake, and I shook my head. I couldn't believe how saggy, pasty and useless this body of mine was. It was a disgrace.

"You're a flabby sack of shit, Harvey," I said as steam started to rise behind me. "You know that? Fucking pathetic."

II

One of the locals started in on me first thing next morning.

No sooner had I stepped out the front door of my hotel than I found this tall, skinny blond guy in a shiny black three-piece suit standing right in front of me. He was holding a lacquered cane next to his hip like a sword and wearing a long topcoat across his shoulders like a cape. We looked at each other, and I could tell he'd been in the war just like I had. Looked like he'd done a little better for himself coming back than I had, though. Even better, he looked like he was about to start preaching the virtues of starting a whole new life by picking up where I'd left off so long ago. *Great,* I thought. *Here we go.*

"Greetings," he said, wearing this slick smile I wanted to put my foot through. He was smiling like I was his new best friend. "You aren't from here originally, are you?"

Oh, and he was a fucking rocket scientist too.

"Of course not," he went on. "How long have you been back?"

"Who's asking?"

"I am called Daniel Mardero, but my name is Bedaliel. I am an Elohim of the Second House, which Michael named Asharu. I am an emissary of Nazathor, Princess of Majestic Liberation. And you are..."

"Busy," I told him. "But you can call me Harvey if you got to keep talking, Mandrake."

I walked around the guy to the curb and tried to hail a cab. Two seconds later, I heard him clear his throat and walk back over to me. He got right beside me and took my elbow. I resisted the urge to do the obvious thing.

"It's *Mardero,*" he said. "And I already know exactly who you're looking for. I know the place he revealed himself, as well as where he was last seen. I know what they showed on the news and what was cut out. I've established many connections in this community, and I can help—"

"You don't know shit, pal," I said, jerking my arm loose. "Not about me or who I'm looking for. It ain't even who you think, so piss off."

"Then you're not trying to find the Morni—"

"Nope," I said, waving down a cab at last. "But even if I was, I wouldn't want help. If I did, I'd have brought it with me."

"Very well," Mardero said, obviously pissed but too classy to say so. "Good luck to you on your own then."

"Yeah, whatever."

I turned my back on him as the cab finally pulled up to the curb and threw grimy water onto the sidewalk. It drenched my shoes and should have gotten Mardero's too, but he was gone by the time the cab stopped.

Good riddance, I thought.

Spread the word that I don't want to be bothered. I got work to do.

◆ ◆ ◆

During the cab ride, I forgot about Mardero for a while and thought about what Sylvia'd told me the night before. Apparently, she and her husband had met in some acting school in New York, where they'd gotten married. They moved to LA to be movie stars after graduation, but the only roles they were good enough for were janitor and secretary. About a year later, they settled down, bought a tiny house together and had Sharon.

Flash forward fifteen years and a day, now here we were. Sylvia and her husband, Jimmy, were split up but not legally divorced. Sharon worked a part-time job at a local library for pocket money. She lived at the house with her mother for a while, then crashed at her pop's apartment on his couch until the stench of his booze drove her out again. She repeated this pattern as necessary, pulling her dad out of the gutter and cleaning him off when he drank too much, then heading back to wade through Sylvia's mess and soak up the old lady's bitterness.

Right after the so-called Devil's Night Riots, though, Sylvia got scared because Sharon was with Jimmy who lives real close to all the action. She calls to check on the two of them, only to find out Sharon isn't there. Hasn't been for a while, either. Sylvia freaks out and calls the school and the library, but Sharon hasn't been to either place since before the last time Jimmy saw her. The cops look around town and check the hospitals and the morgues, but Sharon never turns up. Since they got more important things to do, they generously write Sharon off as a runaway and promise to call in if Sharon ever happens to turn up.

The kid's probably under a hundred tons of concrete somewhere, but it's *possible* she just ran off. She could definitely do a lot worse than ditching her pig mother and drunk father. She'd probably be better off on her own, provided she wasn't just so much hamburger by now. If it were up to me, I wouldn't even have been looking for her. Trouble was, of course, it wasn't up to me. Once word had gotten to Sal back in Jersey that his baby sister's kid had disappeared, he'd suddenly turned into heroic big brother. And considering the fact that I both made Sal uncomfortable and owed him a favor, I was the perfect candidate for this little cross-country jaunt. He wanted me out of his face for a while so he could figure out what to do about me.

Fine, whatever. I know how the game works. So here I was on the wrong side of the country looking for some runaway—who was probably dead—for some crooked gangster I don't even like, out in the middle of this urban hell on earth. I bet the Devil would just be laughing his damned head off if he could see me. That prick.

Anyhow, it was cheerful thoughts such as this that kept me company as I took a cab through late-morning rush traffic to the apartment of one Jimmy Sphener—Sylvia's estranged husband and Sharon's father. He was the last person I knew who'd seen Sharon alive, so he was the only lead I had. Unfortunately, according to Sylvia, he was a wastrel, killing himself as slow as he knew how with booze and cigarettes. Plus, he hadn't even seemed to realize his own daughter had run away and was probably lying facedown under a pile of rubble. I couldn't help but think how this wasn't likely to go well for Jimmy without some kind of miracle.

* * *

Meeting Jimmy face to face didn't improve his chances much. The second I saw him, this ugly worm coiled in my guts and dug in barbed claws. I got this feeling like I was going to start spewing my guts up and not be able to stop until I passed out or choked on my own puke. God, hardcore drunks make me sick.

Lucky for him, though, Jimmy didn't give me a good reason to just snap his neck right there and put him out of our misery. I found him in this little third-floor walk-up, trying to fight down a hangover with instant coffee, Advil and a half shot of the same hooch that'd done him in the night before. As it turned out, Sylvia had called him this morning and told him to be expecting me, so he'd dragged himself out of bed to make himself presentable. Have to give a guy credit for trying, I guess.

He invited me in and mumbled something about the couch while he shuffled around trying to tidy the place up some. His eyes were bloodshot and I could smell stomach acid on his breath, but he'd showered and his hair was combed like a civilized person's. He talked in that sort of heavy whisper a hangover victim gets after an all-nighter, but he wasn't slurring, and he didn't have that pleading whine a lot of drunks get the morning after.

We talked for a long time, going over basically the same ground I'd been over with Sylvia the night before. He talked about how proud he was of his little girl, but I could see how sad he was too. He felt sorry for her for having to spend so much time with her slob mother but having no one but him to retreat to. He said he could tell she pitied him, but she was too young to know that her pity only made him drink more. I hadn't asked him for his fucking life sob story, but I could sympathize with the bastard on one level. I knew about feeling sorry for a bright kid with a bright future because her pop was a worthless bum. That'd been my story, too, before one of Sal's guys had shot me in the head.

Once Jimmy got all that out of his system, he finally told me what I'd come looking for about when Sharon had disappeared. He told me Sharon had started coming home later and later from the library, that she wasn't spending as much time doing homework before bed anymore and how her grades had slipped as a result. Jimmy hadn't had the guts to punish her, but he'd had enough sense to go snooping around in her room one day while she was gone.

"So what'd you find?" I asked. "Diary about some boy she was screwing?"

"No," Jimmy said. "Drugs. I found a bag of marijuana and a foil packet of LSD in a shoebox in her closet."

"No shit?" I said. "Where'd she get it from?"

"That's what I wanted to know. I put it here on the coffee table when she got home that afternoon and talked to her about it. I didn't even drink that day. We just talked about where she got the drugs and how long she'd been using them."

Father of the fucking year. "And?"

"She met the kid she got it from at the library. He was some college guy who came in every once in a while to talk to her and hang out. They started going out last year."

"Wait, this was last year when Sharon would have been fourteen?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"And this guy would have been... what... nineteen?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Are you out of your mind letting a nineteen-year-old even *look* at your fourteen-year-old daughter?"

"Hey, I didn't know this was going on, remember?" Jimmy said. Now that whine was starting to come out. "Besides, it's only like five years' difference. If they were in their twenties or thirties, it wouldn't even matter."

"Yeah? How about this: When this guy got his driver's license, Sharon was eleven. When he went to his senior prom, she was twelve. Does it matter yet?"

"Okay," Jimmy said, wincing as I got louder. "You're right. I didn't do my best thinking when Sharon was around."

"No shit. So this college punk's dating your high school daughter and giving her drugs, and you finally found out about it. What'd you say to her then?"

"I didn't have the right to say much of anything, did I?" Jimmy muttered. "I've been between jobs, and I've been drinking more than usual. The weekend before this happened, Sharon'd had to haul me up off the bathroom floor and clean my own puke off me. All'*she* had was some acid and a dime bag of pot stashed in her closet. What could I really say?"

"How about, 'Quit taking drugs, drop your fuckhead dealer boyfriend and do your fucking homework' for starters? She's only fifteen years old, for Christ's sake."

There was that jolt again, but it was easier to ignore this time.

"I know," Jimmy moaned, looking at the floor. "I tried to talk to her about it again after that, I really did. I worked my courage up for it right before the big earthquake. Before Sharon left for work the last night I saw her, I told her we had to talk when she got back. I didn't hear from her again after that. I figured she'd just dodged back to her mothers 'til I let it drop."

"You didn't even call?" Jimmy hung his head. "Even after the earthquake and the *three fucking days of riots*? What about when your wife called the cops? Did you bring up any of this stuff to them?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I told them she left here mad the last night I saw her. I didn't tell them about the drugs or where she got them, or even who she got them from. I couldn't tell the cops or Sylvia about any of it. I didn't want them thinking about Sharon that way. Or me. Besides, they checked all the hospitals and morgues and she never turned up. She probably just ran off for a while to clear her head. Everything'll be all right. She just needs time."

"What she *needed* was somebody smacking some sense into her when she started acting like a JD," I said. "You're her fucking father, Jimmy. You were supposed to be taking care of her so she didn't end up running off to 'clear her head' in the first place. Instead, your fucking *brother-in-law*'s got to send me all the way across the fucking country to find her because you can't be bothered to worry. You didn't even try to stop her, you bag of shit."

Red heat bloomed on Jimmy's face for a second, but I could tell it was more shame than outrage.

"You're right," he said in this flat, hollow voice. He slumped in his chair just like Sylvia had. "You're right.

I didn't do enough. I never did. And now Sharon's... Oh God, I should have done something."

"Damn right you should have, Jimmy," I said. "So now you're going to help me. We understand each other?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Good. Now tell me what you know about this boyfriend of Sharon's, and I'll go see what he knows about her running off. If you're lucky, she just ran to him and she's been too scared to leave since the quake and the riots. If you're lucky, she ain't just a smear on the sidewalk somewhere."

"Yeah," Jimmy said without much hope.

"So what's his name?"

"It's Ellis, she said. She didn't give me his last name or tell me where he lives, though. That's the most she ever talked about him. I was going to make her tell me more when she got home, but... I swear, if she'd told me anything else about him, I'd have been out there myself, asking questions, trying to find him."

"That's bullshit, Jimmy, and I ought to break your jaw for saying it. But, I won't. I know a local guy with some connections, so I'm going to get his help tracking this 'Ellis' down instead. That's how lucky you are."

"You will?" Jimmy said. The light through the blinds caught his eyes, and I could see little tears swelling up. Each one was full of all the shame and guilt he felt for letting his daughter disappear, and his relief that the search wasn't over yet. "Really? Honest to God you will? I'm so sorry. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't bother, you fucking waste," I said, standing and grabbing my coat. "I'm not bringing Sharon back *here* if I find her. You had your chance to take care of her, but you're the reason she's gone. I want you to remember that for as long as you've got left."

Jimmy's mouth was really working now, and his eyes were red and puffy. One of his tears broke free and rolled down his cheek.

"But she's my daughter," he sputtered.

"You don't deserve a daughter!" I roared, surprising myself with how angry I was.

Jimmy didn't answer that, but I didn't really expect him to. He just put his head in his hands and started sobbing quietly to himself. He knew I was right, and I knew he knew because I'd been in this position myself less than a week ago. Before everything had changed.

"Damn it, look at me, Jimmy!" I said, grabbing him by the hair and lifting him to his feet in front of me. His eyes and mouth sprung open, but before he could say anything, I took off my sunglasses and hat. Jimmy glared at me then jumped when he saw my scar and the red mess of my right eye. All the fight went out of him then, when our gazes locked.

"Did you think I was just going to leave, you puke?" I growled, glaring at him with eyes that must have looked like windows straight into Hell. "No way, you son of a bitch. You don't get to just drink away your self-pity this time. You wasted the grace God gave you, and now your marker's up. It's time to pay, Jimmy, and I'm here to collect."

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I felt a little better when I left Jimmy's place, but not much. Sure, I felt stronger and a lot more self-righteous than when I'd shown up, but now I was hungry. I got in the first cab I saw and had it take me to this fast food joint I'd noticed on the way over. It mostly served foil-wrapped heart attacks, but it was advertising some kind of new grilled-chicken salad, too. My stomach was curling up on itself demanding a double cheeseburger with bacon (kind of like a kid throwing a tantrum), but I had to quit eating those things. It was garbage like that that'd turned my body into the disgusting, greasy dough ball it was, and I decided to change all that after getting shot in the head. So instead of what I wanted, I had a fag lunch and a big glass of water to wash it down.

After that, I went back to my hotel to put out a call to my "local guy with some connections." I took a deep breath, steeled myself for what I had to do next and headed for the roof.

The view from on top of my building sucked. I was only a few stories up, surrounded by other squat buildings that all looked like they were just hunkered down and ready to ride out another quake. The roof itself wasn't all that spectacular either. It had an alcove leading back down to the steps, a couple big AC units, and about as much junk and broken glass as I figured the city let the place get away with leaving out. A two- or three-foot parapet ran around the edge, which really only kept the wind from blowing any of the trash off onto the street. Real classy.

I walked over to the edge and put a foot up on it, looking out over the city with the wind in my face. I took a deep breath, let the wind build for a second, and then started whispering.

"Bedaliel," I said. "I decided I need your help after all. Meet me on the roof of the hotel you met me at this morning. We need to talk."

I stopped there and let the words float away, not even giving Bedaliel a chance to respond. He'd know who sent the message by the sound of my voice, and if I knew guys like him, he'd show up just to rub my face in the fact that I needed help. Sure enough, it wasn't fifteen minutes later when I heard him touch down behind me in the center of the roof. I turned around to greet him, hoping to catch a glimpse of the way he really looked, but he was just Daniel Mardero by the time I laid eyes on him. He strolled toward me with his cane tucked under his arm, his expensive shoes crunching over the broken glass and grit. His topcoat was still draped over his shoulders like a damn cape, and he was smiling like an asshole again.

"What do you want?" I asked him, right when he opened his mouth.

Mardero blinked, thrown entirely off stride. "I beg your pardon," he stammered. "It was you who initiated contact with me. You requested my assistance."

"I know," I said. "I ain't stupid. But I figure if you're going to help me, you're going to want something in return. So what is it? I don't like to chitchat. What's your price?"

"Oh, I hadn't even thought about that," Mardero said. "Not every act of cooperation necessarily needs to have a price atta—"

"Bullshit," I told him. "If that's true, I wouldn't even be here. And I'm pretty sure that since I told you to stick it in your ear this morning you're not feeling generous. So just name your price and get it over with. I don't have all day."

Mardero looked like he might protest again, but he decided to spare me. His eyes took on this appraising glare, then he just smiled. He took his cane out from under his arm and planted it next to his foot. "Your name," he said. "That's all I want for now."

Bastard.

"Harvey," I grumbled. "Just like I told you before. Harvey Ciullo."

"No, sir," Mardero said, cocking an eyebrow. "You know better than that. I want *your* name. As much of it as I gave you of mine in good faith."

I shook my head, but only in irritation. I hate telling people my real name, especially people from the war. Doing that opens me up to them, makes them think I'm their Goddamned friend or something. Basically turns them into major pains in my ass. The only person I willingly told it to is my little daughter back in Jersey, but even she knows better than to say it lightly. I made her swear on her dead mother not to.

But then again, all things considered, it wasn't the worst thing Mardero could have asked. It wasn't like he wanted me to do something for him right then. Besides, this guy's help would finish up this job a hell of a lot faster so I could get back to my little girl. I might as well.

"Fine," I said. "It's Hasmed."

Judging by the way Mardero's eyes widened and how he almost took a big step back, he'd apparently heard of me. Good. If he knew about half the stuff I did during the war, he knew I wasn't somebody to fuck around with. He pulled himself together pretty quick, but it took him just long enough to do it that I was pretty sure we understood one another.

"I see," he said. "I'll remember that. Now, what kind of help can I offer?"

"I'm looking for somebody."

"Of course. The Morningstar. You aren't the first, and none have yet been successful in their search, but an aggregate collection of evid—"

"Uh-uh," I said. "Not him. I'm looking for a kid named Ellis. I don't know his last name."

"Let me... that is... 'Ellis,' you said?" Mardero stammered, apparently stunned that I *still* wasn't looking for Lucifer. "Do you happen to know the name he used during the war? That would be most—"

"It ain't like that," I said. "He wasn't in the war. He's just a kid. Nineteen years old. Pushes drugs around the local library where he probably lives." I gave him Jimmy Sphener's address, figuring that would narrow it down some.

"I don't understand. What's so special about him?"

"None of your damn business," I said. "But I can't go back home to Jersey ''til after I find him, so the sooner you get on that, the better."

"And that's all the assistance you require? Just enough to find this young man. This... human?"

So help me...

"Yeah, that's it, pal. So find a guy who knows a guy and find out what I want to know. You said you were established around here, right?"

"I am," Mardero said. "It's just that... You see, I don't understand something."

I just looked at him, thinking of the best place to stuff that cane of his.

"Why *aren't* you interested in finding Lucifer?" Mardero asked. "Everyone else I've spoken to is obsessed by the search, yet you aren't. Why?"

"Because what's the fucking point?" I said. "I could tell that bastard wasn't anywhere near here the second I got off the plane. He already ran off and hid from the mess he started—just like he always does—so he can go fuck himself for all I care. I've got responsibilities to take care of. So quit jerking me around and just help me like I asked."

"Very well," Mardero said, dropping his gaze. "I'll question my sources about the boy you want and contact you later."

"Good," I said. "Thanks." That wasn't *too* much like pulling teeth. "You know how to reach me."

"I do now."

Mardero turned to leave then, but he hesitated. He looked windward into the sky then back at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"What?" I snapped.

"Harvey," he said. "No... Hasmed. Please believe that our search for the Morningstar *isn't* pointless. Don't you realize what it would mean if we found him? It would mean that the war never really ended."

At that, I just threw my head back and laughed—I couldn't help it. It was a deep, ugly sound from beneath all the fat and meat and bone I was stuck in, retching up from inside the oldest part of me.

"No, it wouldn't, you dipshit," I said between barks. "The war is over, and probably nobody knows it better than your Morningstar. It ended a long time ago, and we *lost*. Now these dirty, ignorant apes are all that's left of what we were fighting for. The sooner you realize that and start looking for something useful to do, the better."

Mardero didn't have anything to say to that, but I knew I hadn't gotten through to him. You can't get through to true believers like him, no matter how much sense you have on your side. But frankly, I didn't care. I had what I wanted from him now. I was one step closer to getting back home to my little girl, and that was all that mattered.

III

Mardero came through for me as the sun was going down that same day, just hours after he'd finally taken off from the roof to get back to chasing Lucifer's shadow. The wind carried his voice from wherever the hell he was, telling me he'd tracked my Ellis down through a chain of dealers and suppliers. He gave me the address of where the kid lived, told me how to find it, and then wished me luck. I thanked him to get rid of him, then headed out to pay Ellis a visit. I left my hat on the bed and kept my glasses folded up in my shirt pocket.

Mardero's directions to Ellis's neighborhood were pretty clear, and it took me no time to find it. In fact, it wasn't even ten blocks from Jimmy Sphener's place, which made it all the more pathetic that that drunk didn't know where his daughter had gone. It was a rundown string of houses just out of Glock range of the projects. I guess it looked worse than it might have otherwise because of the quake and the riots, but it probably wasn't all that different than usual. There was garbage and broken glass everywhere, and the pavement was a black-veined ruin. The beetle-husk of a burned-out car sat upside-down in front of one building, and all kinds of detritus lay in the gutters. And just like everywhere else I'd been in the city, nobody was on the street now that the sun was going down. That was good.

The house Ellis was supposedly in was right in the middle of the block. Every window of the place was broken out and covered with thick sheets of gray plastic, but I could see lights on inside and hear loud music throbbing. Maybe a party was going on. Lucky fucking me. I smashed the front door open, and a hard wind blew in all around me. A couple skinny, strung-out bums looked up at me through wide yellow eyes, but nobody said anything. I asked the one closest to me where Ellis was, and he pointed upstairs. They were waiting on him to finish with his girlfriend, the bum told me, so they could get their party on. Some shit like that.

So I headed for the steps, and the wind went with me, knocking aside empty baggies and fast food wrappers. Couple of condom wrappers, too. This place was a regular bachelor pad, right down to the obligatory filth. Behold the glory.

There weren't many rooms to choose from at the top of the stairs, so I headed for what looked like the master bedroom in the back. The music was coming from that direction, and now that I was up here, I could hear the thumping and creaking symphony of Ellis "finishing with his girlfriend." I strolled down the hall, took a deep breath, cracked my neck a couple times and pushed the door open.

I was greeted by the unpleasant sight of a thick, muscled ass pumping up and down between two scrawny spread legs on a rickety bed in the middle of the room. The room was dank and noisome, and it was lit by a pair of black light bulbs in novelty lamps. The bedsprings were groaning and screeching, and the headboard was smacking the wall, but I could only barely hear that over the music. I closed the door behind me, walked over to the cheap-ass radio and turned the music off. The sound disappeared with a palpable force, and the creaking, thumping and grunting from the bed stopped just as quickly. I crossed my arms and waited for the inevitable.

"Who the fuck...?" the owner of the muscled ass demanded as he sat on the bed and turned around. He probably thought it was one of the junkies from downstairs grown impatient.

When he saw me, though, he disentangled himself from the girl underneath him and got between me and her. He was a tall, muscular son of a bitch with no hair on his head and a barbwire tattoo around his neck. His eyes and skin glowed faintly in the black light, as did his slimy condom.

"You're Ellis, right?" I said. "I been looking for you."

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled at me, gnashing his teeth like he was going to bite me. "How'd you get in here?"

"The wind blew your door open," I said, still perfectly calm.

"Get the fuck out," he said, coming toward me. I couldn't help but notice how his cock was ticking in time with his racing heart. He obviously wasn't scared of me yet.

I wasn't scared of him either. I planted my feet and looked over at his bed. The girl there lay limp like a half-empty blowup doll. Her underwear dangled from one ankle, and she still had her bra on. It had a little pink flower in the center that glowed in the black light. "Is that Sharon Sphener, Ellis? I been looking for her, too. More than you, actually."

"You leave her alone, crackhead," the kid said, taking another step toward me and actually pointing a finger in my face. "Get your ass back downstairs and wait your turn."

Ellis will never know how close he came to total disaster by saying that. I took it entirely the wrong way at first, and it was only the instant I stood there in abject shock that gave me time to realize he was talking about drugs, not Sharon. He still thought—or maybe just hoped—I was a customer.

"Sorry," I said, resisting the urge to snap the kid's finger off with in my teeth anyway. "She's coming with me, kid."

Ellis was fast, I'll give him that. He drove a big, hard fist right into my paunch, blowing the wind out of me and knocking me back an inch. "The fuck she is, man. She's my girl, and you ain't touch—"

The next thing Ellis knew, he was up against the wall. I'd grabbed his wrists, twisted one of them around the wrong way then hit him right under the throat with the heel of my hand. He staggered, and I slammed him backward and held him in place by the neck with my right hand. From the angle we were at, the black light shone full on my face. The hole in my forehead glared like a blind third eye, and my bloody, ruined right eye bulged out farther than the left. As close as I was to him, I knew Ellis could see a little bit of who I'd been during the war and that he didn't like it. He was lucky he only saw so little, especially after that "wait your turn" crack.

"Let me go," he choked, grabbing my forearm in weak desperation. His eyes were rolling like a panicked horse's. "Sharon—"

"How long has she been here, Ellis?" I asked. "Since the riots? Her mother's been worried sick."

Ellis didnk't answer me. He still thought he could get loose. He lashed out with a kick that buried his heel pretty deep in my right thigh, missing my crotch by about an inch. I flinched, then stepped in that much closer, tightened my grip on his throat and grabbed his cock in my other hand. I squeezed it almost as hard as I could and bent it downward sharply. That took the rest of the fight out of Ellis for the moment.

"I'll break this thing off and feed it to you if you do that again," I said. I'd done worse to guys twice his size in the war without thinking twice about it. "Do we understand each another?"

Ellis whimpered. I took that for consent.

"Great. Now here's what you're going to do. You're going to go down your steps and out your front door. You're never going to come anywhere near this girl again, and if you know what's good for you, you're going to stop giving drugs to high school kids. I say again, do we understand each other?"

When I got no answer, I squeezed harder with my right hand and twisted with my left. Ellis gasped and started crying, but he nodded, so I let him go.

"Now get the fuck out of here," I said.

Coughing and holding his raw throat, Ellis did as he was told. I heard his big feet pounding down the hall and the steps, then I heard some surprised shouts downstairs. Apparently, he'd stirred up his patient customers on his way out.

When he was gone, I turned off the black lights and flicked on the actual light switch. With the overhead on, I went and looked down at the little girl on the bed. She was paler and thinner than she'd been in any of the pictures I'd seen of her at Sylvia's place, but she was clearly Sharon Sphener. Her black hair was greasy and lank, and purple circles hung beneath her eyes. The insides of her elbows were spotted with needle tracks, showing me she'd long since graduated past LSD and dime bags. The worst part, though, was the look on her face. Her eyes were only half open, and her expression was this empty mask. There was dried blood in one of her nostrils, and her lips were thin, bloodless lines. It didn't look like she'd been beaten or raped—at least lately—but she was used up and broken in spirit just the same. I looked down at her, thinking about my own precious little girl back home, and it occurred to me just how lucky Ellis was that I hadn't seen this first.

"Sharon," I said, quietly. "Can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes a little wider and looked up at me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Harvey. I've been looking for you, Sharon."

"Where's Ellis? Wasn't he here?"

"He's gone. You ain't seeing him anymore."

"Why?" she whined, still half out of it. "We're going to get married. He can't just leave."

"Like hell," I said.

Sharon tried to argue and look upset, but it didn't last too long. She was still pretty wiped out from the drugs and God only knew what else. I smoothed her hair with my fingers.

"What's wrong with your face?" she asked after a long silence. "Your eye looks weird. And your forehead."

"Bullet," I said. "Somebody shot me in the head. Almost killed me."

"Why?"

"Migraine."

"Okay," she said as if that made perfect sense. "My stomach hurts. I think I'm going to throw up."

"I know, sweetheart," I said. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Ellis made me try some things," she said in a tiny, hollow voice. "Lots of things. He said I'd like it."

"It's okay, Sharon," I said. "That's all over with now."

"Am I dead? Did I OD?"

"No."

"But you got shot.... We're both dead, aren't we?"

"You ain't dead," I said. "You're on your way home."

"Are you a policeman?"

"No, I'm an—"

I don't know why, but I almost told her the truth then. What was true a long time ago, anyway, back before the war. Luckily, though, I caught myself and just shook my head. There was no point in telling her. I'd just be wasting my breath.

"I'm just here to take care of you."

Sharon's eyes slipped shut again, and she reminded me so much of my own daughter right then. So helpless and trusting. It was sad in a way to think that I would do anything in the world to look after my little girl, but neither one of this girl's parents could do the same. It just didn't make any sense to me that people could create a life that depended on them so utterly yet not dedicate themselves body, mind and soul to taking care of it. It was just one more reason the world was going to hell.

When Sharon lay still, I brushed back her sweaty hair and felt the amber-colored haze behind her eyes. It repulsed me yet tried to pull me closer and infect me with Sharon's nascent addiction. I let her go and shook my head. She'd ruined herself coming here. Everything that had made her who she was and filled her with the spark of life was covered in a layer of slime so thick it was choking her to death. That instinct buried deep inside me bubbled up again, and this time I couldn't force it back down like I had at Jimmy's place. Sharon looked so pitiful and broken... how could I look at her and not do something? Besides, there was Sal back home to think about. More importantly, there was Tina. I wouldn't be able to look at my precious little Tina again if I didn't do something.

So I put a warm hand on Sharon's forehead, smoothed her hair back and leaned over her. "Don't worry, Sharon," I whispered. "Everything's going to be okay. You're going home now."

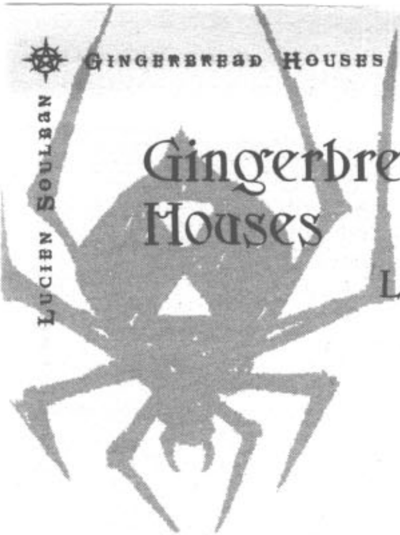
When I felt Sharon nod weakly, still clinging to consciousness, I touched her hair one last time then did what I had to do. I held the back of her head with my right hand and used my left to hold her nose and mouth shut. She smelled it coming—I hadn't had chance to wash the slime off my palm—but she was too weak to fight me off. She squeezed my arm and reached up like she wanted to touch my face, but there wasn't a thing on earth she could do. She jerked, then squirmed, and then trembled, then just lay still with me pressing her down into the wrinkled, grimy sheets where I'd found her.

By degrees, her muscles relaxed until all that lay on the bed was an empty mud doll that nobody but me had known how to treat right. When I was finished, I sat back on my heels then let go of Sharon's mouth and nose. Her last breath—an echo of the first divine breath that had given her life—slid out from deep insider her, and I watched it dissipate. I sat there for a long time waiting for someone to come and collect it, to take that breath back where it came from, but nobody did. No old enemies. No old friends.

I don't know why I was surprised... I guess I just figured that even a pathetic little girl like Sharon deserved better in death than she'd had in life. But that wasn't up to me. Nothing I did or said was going to change the fact that God doesn't care like He's supposed to about these people He created. Nothing's going to change the fact that these people don't care about each other like they're supposed to. So fuck it. Why should I care? Because God and Lucifer both said I ought to? Fuck them, too. They could both go to Hell and take this ruin of a world with them. There's only one thing in all this wreckage I cared about, and she was all the way across the country wondering when her daddy was coming home.

So it was time I got back there, I figured. I'd done just about everything I was obligated to do out here to keep Sal happy. All I had left to do was take Sharon's body back to her mother's place and give Sylvia the bad news. Tell her that there wasn't anything I could do and make sure she knew that if she'd swallowed her pride and called her big brother for help sooner, her little girl would still be alive right now. Not that it would teach Sylvia anything to hear that, but it would leave her in the proper state of mind. It was better than she deserved anyway, considering she wasn't a good enough mother—or even a good enough person—to keep her own daughter safe at home where she belonged.

All that was really beside the point. All that mattered was that I had to get home. My little girl was waiting for her daddy to come back to her, and no force in Heaven or Hell was going to stop me.



Gingerbread Houses

Lucien Soulban

I

The smiling, red-jacketed valet opened *Polizeikommissar* Gerhard Liebner's door, filling the air-conditioned car with a swell of hot Las Vegas air. Liebner, grizzled like some gumshoe from a dime-store novel, grunted his way free of the driver's seat. He was a long throw away from Templehof's *Polizeipr‰sidium* in Berlin, and instead played unwilling tourist here, a faceless drone in a city catering to anonymity.

"Welcome to the Amazon, sir," the valet said.

"*Ja, ja,*" Liebner grunted, taking the parking stub.

The valet smiled in that typical condescending manner whenever anyone spoke English (or something that sounded like it) with any national inflection. A second valet grabbed Liebner's worn suitcase from the back seat while the first drove off with his rental.

"Staying long?" the second valet asked, heading for the lobby. The doors slid open, assaulting Liebner with the singsong bells and whistles of the slot machines that littered the dark green gambling halls. Resin and plastic trees spurted from the ground all around him while vines and a fake canopy of leaves drooped from the ceiling. All the trappings of the Amazon jungle, restored with the diligence of popular entertainment.

"A couple of days," Liebner replied.

"Then back to Berlin."

"Berlin, huh? First time in Vegas?"

"I'm not supposed to be here," Liebner said, "but the military appropriated what was left of LAX and all neighboring airfields..."

"You were in LA?" The valet asked. "Is it bad? I mean, I saw all the quake footage, but... is it really that bad?"

Liebner paused, locking his gray eyes on the valet. "It was like a snow globe filled with debris and corpses... only, God's still shaking it."

"Yeeeah..." the valet said, realizing he'd backed up into a strange conversation. "But what about that angel footage? I mean, that's gotta be a joke, right?"

Liebner shook his head. "That's why I went."

"To see the angel?"

"Bastard owes me five Marks," Liebner said. A smile never escaped the corners of his mouth. He gave the bewildered valet a couple of dollars and checked his watch. Twenty minutes to get his room and freshen up before his appointment at the "Jungle Bar." A pity he couldn't bring a gun with him.

He still didn't know if he was going to kill Thaol when he saw him.

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The waiter deposited a tall glass of Coors with a smile and left Liebner to his new experience. Since he couldn't get any Dortmunder Export or good English Bitters here, he opted for the local flavors—and immediately regretted his decision. Coors was diluted water, cooled piss. He set the glass back down with an unsatisfied grunt and watched the gambling tables around him. Poker, craps, roulette. All the games sang with a collision of probabilities, a fluid symphony of odds melting each second into a new chorus. Liebner's head hurt from all the changing parameters affecting the games. The shift of feet that altered the die roll, the momentary distraction blurring the card counter's judgment, the random slot elements juggling certainties like a politician handling promises.

"You'll give yourself a headache," the black-haired waiter said, suddenly looming over Liebner.

"Nothing to drink," Liebner said, looking out across the tables.

"I called you here, remember... Ahrimal?"

Hearing his celestial name sent a familiar shiver through him. He may be wearing Gerhard Liebner's body, but he *was* Ahrimal, The Sower of Fearsome Stars, a demon of the Fourth House. His gaze went back to the lanky waiter. He didn't see Thaol behind the black eyes or slightly bemused grin. He suddenly felt naked without a gun.

"Thaol... I didn't recognize you."

"It's Darren now."

"What happened to the charming Turkish fellow I met last time?"

"The Sicilians didn't like him shaving their profits, so they strapped C-4 under his car seat."

"Good for them. So, you work here, now... Darren?"

"That's how I got you the hotel room. Vegas is booked solid with LA's refugees coming here."

"I thought I smelled haunted desperation."

"No, that's normal for Vegas. How's LA?"

"Flat. Skip the pretense," *Darren*. Why am I here?"

"I'm on lunch break right now, but they don't like us socializing in uniform. I'll go change."

Thaol left, leaving Ahrimal to his thoughts. He didn't like this at all. When last he'd seen Thaol, he'd been camped out in the body of a Turkish smuggler pipelining Sicilian-cut opium through Berlin. They fought, and Liebner's body nearly died, almost sending

Ahrimal back into the Abyss. Not bad for someone Ahrimal once considered an ally. Now, Thaol had contacted Ahrimal through the *Polizeipr%osidium* in Berlin. It was only blind luck "Liebner" happened to be "vacationing" in LA, following up on Lucifer's television debut. He should have flown out from San Francisco, but Thaol's plea for help was too strange to ignore. Besides, Ahrimal wanted information on a Berlin smuggling ring killing undercover policemen, and Thaol was Ahrimal's only lead.

Thaol returned in plain black slacks and a white dress shirt loose at the neck. Ahrimal noticed he also carried himself differently. His shoulders drooped and two puffed crescents of fatigue sagged under his eyes. He seemed... humbled.

"First," Thaol said, wringing his hands, "I'm truly sorry for what happened in Berlin. I was... a different person then."

"Why here?" Ahrimal said, interrupting the apology. "You were hoping the gambling would distract me?"

"What? No," Thaol said, pleading his innocence.

Leibner kept quiet. He didn't want to admit how successful Thaol's gambit might be. Normally, he could read the flows of chance better than a Berlin streetwalker could spot a cop, but here, the barrage of shifting probabilities was too much white noise.

"Look," Thaol said, sighing. "I invited you here because I'm sorry..."

"And," Ahrimal said, "to ask for my help."

"Yes... but I've changed."

"Of course," Ahrimal said, shaking his head. "You found an innocent host crushed by a cruel world, and it miraculously changed you. You want to make amends... *Mensch und Kinder*!"

Thaol hissed under his breath, "It's not like that. I'm not a fucking saint... I never said I was. But the old Thaol wouldn't have put up with this pretense... asking for help... bringing you out here to kill you?"

"No," Ahrimal admitted.

"I always went straight for the throat. Why spoil my advantage by revealing my new host?"

"Fine," Ahrimal said. "Say I believe you. Why should I help you?"

"Because, I'll give you whatever you want. A list of drug runners and safe houses in Berlin and Amsterdam, my Sicilian contacts and all my ex-acquaintances in the Turkish mafia still operating out of Kreuzberg and Neukˆlln."

"Just like that, you'd give them up?"

"Well... they did blow me up. Besides, it's not my life anymore. I... have better things in my life. I hope."

"Give me a name on good faith," Ahrimal said, "one the *Kripo* can check immediately... and one worth my attention."

Thaol nodded and pulled a paper from his pocket. "I thought you'd ask." He slid Ahrimal the paper. Ahrimal nodded and rose.

"Meet me tomorrow morning for breakfast, 7:00 a.m. If your information doesn't check out by then," Ahrimal said, "I leave."

◆ ◆ ◆

Thaol sat in the casino restaurant with its garden wall of creeping vines. He watched the trickle of humanity at the tables where a few hardcore gamblers sat, hard liquor from last night still in their gut and harder expressions still on their faces. None, however, looked worse than Ahrimal with Liebner's rumpled white dress shirt and grizzled bite-the-bullet grimace.

"You look like shit.," Thaol said with a smug smile.

Ahrimal sat down with a "woof."

"So? Did my information check out?"

"It did," Ahrimal said, his lips curling from the admission. He waited for the bleach blond to pour him coffee before continuing. "*Kripo* raided the Oberschˆneweide warehouse in Treptow and found a large cache of automatic weapons and drugs. They also caught three men, but... I want your dealer's name, the one selling you Russian surplus."

"Only if you help me."

Ahrimal studied Thaol a moment, searching his black glassy eyes for a clue, any nugget of information as to what he was getting himself into. He'd tried reading Thaol's fate yesterday when he was serving people, but it was a puzzling, scattered quilt of pictures that made no sense.

Ahrimal nodded. Thaol smiled, bleeding more relief through his grin than satisfaction. The waitress returned and took their orders. After she left, Darrin dropped his request like a guillotine blade on Bastille Day—ugly and quick.

"I need to find out who I am."

"Excuse me?!" Ahrimal asked.

"My host... I need to figure out who he was."

"I thought you said your name was Darren?"

"I picked that name myself. I bought illegal documents and fake IDs... I created Darren because this host was completely brain-fried when I found him."

"But there's always some lingering memories... something left of the host."

"Not this time," Thaol said. "He was a complete tabula rasa. I understood English and had some familiarity with American culture, but nothing more."

"How'd you get the illegal documents then?"

"My former host, the Turk, knew things. I pulled some jobs for the local hoods, then used those contacts to get a new identity."

Ahrimal sat back, eying Thaol carefully. This was too strange. Most demons used their hosts' memories to form templates of proper conduct and familiarize themselves with contemporary society. Most often, though, they remained rampaging demons, celestial carnivores ready to bite into the world's ribcage. Only a few found strength of character in the echoes of the soul they'd displaced, just enough to still the razor-laden storm of bitter memories carried over from the Abyss. If this "Darren" had no mortal memories, no resolve born of hard experience, then Thaol should be an even bigger butcher than he was as the Turk.

"You don't believe me?"

"You," Ahrimal said, choosing his words carefully, "expect me to believe you found a blank host..."

"Yes."

"And that you gave up working for the local mafia... to work here... at a casino... as a simple waiter?"

"I... find the anonymity comfortable," Thaol said, his voice barely a whisper. "I don't want to hurt or kill anymore. I don't want to fight my way back into Heaven or find Lucifer. I just want to pretend I'm... human... forget about the pain... the suffering."

"You're joking!" Ahrimal said. A few bar patrons looked their way, but Ahrimal didn't care. They were shadows in his presence. "You're a demon," Ahrimal said with a hiss. "You commanded the Seventh Phalanx against the Principalities and almost boiled an entire ocean to kill one angel. God entrusted you with drumming the hearts of predators before he cast you into an Abyss for eons. How do you forget that?"

"I didn't think I could, Ahrimal," Thaol said with a curious smile, "but I found a hole...."

"A hole?"

"In the host. And once I started pushing bad memories into it, it was like a drain. I rid myself of all that hate and pain. I feel closer to peace than I've ever been since the rebellion started."

"You're mad. A hole!?" Ahrimal asked while the waitress set their drinks down and gave them both a raised eyebrow once-over. Ahrimal shooed her off with a gesture.

"That's what it feels like," Thaol said.

"So there's a little hole inside you?"

"Yes."

"And it's conveniently taken your troubled memories and anger, and put them... somewhere?"

"Uh-huh."

"Of course!" Ahrimal said, slapping his forehead. "You found the celestial plug that comes standard in all mortals. I forgot about those."

Thaol shrugged. "It's true... I can prove it."

"Please."

Thaol nodded to the clipped rose drooping in the table vase. Looking around quickly, he touched the flower. It blossomed, the petals flaring radiant and fresh. A fragrant perfume punctured the air like a flower shop had sprung up beneath the table.

"It requires an inner solace to bring life to dead things, " Thaol said, "I lost that during the rebellion."

Ahrimal sat there quietly, desperately trying to pierce whatever chicanery Thaol had used against him. Thaol was right, though; the closer one came to the hem of salvation's robe, to being unburdened from hell's thorns, the more beneficial their powers proved. Ahrimal, however, wasn't easily satisfied with happy endings and pat explanations. He closed his eyes, focusing on the flower's fate, that spinning wheel hurtling headlong toward inevitability. He ignored the widely gyrating parameters around him from the gamblers and tables, focusing solely on the path of this flower.

The montage of cracked instamatic impressions stunned Ahrimal.

Snap... the restaurant kept the rose for another two days...

Snap... the waitress took the rose home because it was still beautiful...

Snap... the waitress clipped the thorns and roots, but they returned every morning at this exact time...

Snap... the waitress planted the rose in her garden...

Snap... the flower was a hedge of roses, like ruby droplets against a verdant green...

Snap... the rose would forever bloom, bringing a beautiful smile to the waitress's face and those of her daughters...

Ahrimal and Thaol didn't have that kind of power. Hadn't since they'd once counted themselves as angels.

Ahrimal opened his eyes and stared at Thaol, who appeared uncomfortable.

"Say something," Thaol asked, almost pleading.

"How?"

"I told you... the hole."

"Impossible."

"Yet, here I am."

Ahrimal stared at Thaol until the waitress finally arrived with eggs, bacon, toast and a bowl of fruit. Ahrimal ate quietly, as though any noise would shatter his thoughts like precious crystal and dispel his already vague realities. Thaol watched him, uncomfortable yet unwilling to tip the crystal over. Ahrimal continued eating, eyeing Thaol like a mongrel protecting his last scrap of food. He finished. The waitress cleaned off the table.

"If what you say is true... if," Ahrimal said finally, "you've truly found peace, why ask my help?"

Thaol exhaled with forceful sorrow.

"I'm dreaming things. Memories, fantasies... I don't know what."

"Things from your host?"

"I'm slowly hearing his... thoughts.... They're growing stronger...."

"Like what?"

"Bad things.... Terrible things."

"Are you sure it isn't your own anger. The pain catching up to you?"

"I know my own memories, Ahrimal," Thaol said, his voice an octave south of miserable. "These aren't them. I've never taken a blowtorch to small animals and children's genitals."

"So? That's not unusual for you."

"But it's not me, dammit. I want no part of these memories, if that's what they are. That's why I need your help. I need to find out who I am. What I've gotten myself into."

"And, if you go to the police, they might arrest you..."

"Because of my host. Yes. You understand now."

"I'm not sure I do, but I'll help."

"Thank you," Thaol said, nearly tripping over his own words in gratitude.

"Don't thank me yet. I'm doing this to make sure your host wasn't a monster. If I think you'll harm anyone, Thaol, I'll send you on your way."

"Trust me, Ahrimal. I don't want to hurt people."

Ahrimal pushed himself away from the table. "Then breakfast was on you. Hurry up, we have work."

"What're we doing?" Thaol asked.

"Taking your picture and fingerprints," Ahrimal said, "so I can see if I'm going to kill you or not."

II

Ahrimal spent the morning with Thaol before the born-again angel left for work. It was enough time to secure his fingerprints using a make-up blush kit they bought in a store, and take his picture from a photo booth in a chintzy shopping plaza.

Ahrimal's investigative options in this case were limited, both by what he brought to the table and by what Thaol could offer. A German cop had no authority to investigate in the States, not that Thaol gave him much information in the first place. No name, no address, no Social Security number, no whisper of self identity. All he had to his name was a set of fingerprints, which, it turned out, were badly scarred. Whoever "Darren" was, he'd partially filed off the surface skin on his fingers. Still, enough ridges survived that Ahrimal got partial prints. After lifting a fragmentary whorl off the right thumb, two arches, a loop and several unique scar patterns, Ahrimal went to a photocopy store and enlarged the prints for easy identification over the fax. He then sent several faxes to his friend, *Polizeioberkommissar* Rudolph Boch, in Berlin. Boch had some contacts with Interpol and wouldn't ask too many questions. Ahrimal hoped Boch could convince his associates to access the FBI's Automated Fingerprint Identification System. After that, he was pretty sure the FBI's AFIS system was hooked into regional police departments and their own AFIS networks. It was a backdoor raid screaming of complications, but Ahrimal had few options. All this trouble, just to determine if Darren had a record. Ahrimal, however, was fairly sure that anyone who'd taken the time to file down his own prints was on someone's list.

That left Ahrimal with two options: either sit around and wait for information that may or may not help or go fish and ask some discreet questions. Ahrimal wasn't much for waiting.

* * *

The Ironbrook Facility was the ugly bastard child of the industrial era, with its rust-tinged brownstone facade, flat walls and dagger-thin windows covered by thick metal grates. Hooded cameras perched along the sides and exterior parking lot quietly surveyed the premises like one-eyed vultures waiting for someone to die. Ahrimal took an instant disliking to the asylum. It was where rich families disposed of their embarrassments.

Ahrimal drove past the lot a couple more times before parking his car on an adjoining street. Looking in the mirror, he whispered a few words once the privilege of God alone. His features shifted. It was a subtle job. Not enough to look completely different, but enough to prevent witnesses from identifying him through key points like his hawkish nose, broad chin or the scar on his cheek. He removed ten years from his looks, stretching out the wrinkles, darkening his hair from brown to black and covering the gray streaks. Looking as nondescript as possible, Ahrimal walked across the open parking lot to the security gate.

The bored and stocky security guard, more beef than muscle, eyeballed Ahrimal on approach. Ahrimal nodded and flashed a badge, crafting an illusion to fabricate a faded golden detective's shield, like the ones on television, over his German wallet card. Evidently, the guard had watched the same shows and didn't bother stopping Ahrimal when he went straight for the sign-in sheet and played at being bored with the routine.

"Who're you here to see?" the guard asked.

"What's her name in records," Ahrimal said, dropping his voice to hide his accent.

"Ms. Collings?"

"Yup."

The guard called the records office. "Yeah," the guard said over the phone, "there's a Detective..."

"Boch," Ahrimal said.

"Detective Bach here to see you... all right." The guard buzzed the gate open. "You can go in."

Ironbrook's interior was equally as depressing as its exterior, if not more so. Metal mesh and opaque glass covered office doors, age yellowed the white walls like urine stains and the halogens cast an evenly anemic pallor over everything. The lobby chairs were linked together like bus terminal seats, and were probably just as comfortable.

Ahrimal casually walked up to an orderly with arms like tree trunks and a chin that could break walnuts. He flashed Darren's picture in one hand and his illusionary badge in the other. Before the orderly could react to either, Ahrimal pocketed the badge and kept the picture handy.

"Remember him?" Ahrimal asked, playing his best John Wayne.

"Yeah... Hammil," the orderly said cautiously. "You guys catch him?"

"Not yet. Just wondering how those two orderlies are. The ones he threw around."

"They're fine," the orderly replied, relief creeping back into his face. "Just bruised egos... you know."

"Good. Thanks," Ahrimal said, going back into the lobby. He had a name now, at least part of one. This was a risky gambit, but Ahrimal felt useful. Thaol found Darren in the medical ward of this asylum, hooked into an IV drip and life support. Thaol didn't intend on inhabiting this body, not without some examination, but something about the host just drew Thaol in. Actually, he said it felt like he fell into Darren's body, like a rolling rock seeking out the lowest point of the slope. Darren's body was a few weeks atrophied but otherwise healthy. The only lingering mystery, however, was the complete absence of memory; the host had no identity. Thaol, however, didn't have time to figure out why. The machine monitoring brain activity shot off like fireworks when he fell into the body. Thaol snapped the straps holding him down, threw two orderlies around hard before pulling the grate off one window and squeezing through. That was four months ago.

Ahrimal waited a few moments before Ms. Collings, forty years old with a back as straight as a plank, arrived with a displeased look creasing her pinched face. Ahrimal instantly noticed the tiny gold cross nestled against her white button-up blouse.

"Detective Boch," she said with all the charm of tree bark. "Your timing is highly inconvenient."

"I understand," Ahrimal said. "And I do appreciate you taking the time to help me."

"I haven't got all day," she said, practically tapping her foot in impatience. She was trying to dismiss him.

Ahrimal pulled the photograph from his pocket. "I was hoping we could discuss Mr. Hammil's case. Privately."

"Very well," Ms. Collings said in obvious displeasure. She spun on her heels and walked down the hallway, not even waiting for Ahrimal to follow suit.

Ahrimal could tell she used her short temper to bully people around and keep them off balance. That way, she could control the situation. He didn't like her games. He'd had enough of petty tyrants to last him several eternities.

Ms. Collings' office was as austere as her demeanor. Her desk, computer, printer, filing cabinet and two chairs were the extent of her clutter. Even the picture on the wall, the only frivolous touch to the entire room, seemed sobering, despite its smiling but manufactured stare. Christ in a gold-leaf nimbus blessed the room vapidly. A nameplate on the desk offered a simple courtesy that she never did: June Collings.

"Well?" Ms. Collings said, sitting down.

"This *is* rather embarrassing for the department," Ahrimal said, sitting down as well. "The detective investigating Hammil's case misplaced some files. Sloppy work, really."

Ms. Collings continued staring, unmoved by any pretense he spun. Ahrimal wasn't sure if she saw through his charade or was still playing her games.

"I need to confirm some information from Mr. Hammil's admission records."

"That's it?" she said with an impertinent snap. "You came all this way for that?"

Ahrimal shrugged. "The chief thought it best I make the request in person."

"Why? I've never seen you before."

"I'm handling the investigation now. It's taking too long."

Ms. Collings studied Ahrimal a moment before announcing: "Give me your supervisor's number. I want to confirm this with him." She picked up the phone.

Ahrimal sighed. This wasn't getting him anywhere, and she wasn't going to drop the matter either. He stared at her, weaving through time's strands as he'd done with the rose. Time dilated around him and the universe unfolded at his feet like a ripped gazetteer made of light. Everything glowed a warm blue, covered with a network of lines and courses, potentials and eventualities leading from here to a thousand onwards. All he had to do was pull on one ethereal strand to unravel its likeliest destination. This was a celestial map charting the movement of creation itself; it was a cartographer's omnibus. Everything had a path and Ahrimal understood each segment of those paths. Now, however, the universe was in disarray, a rail yard of eventualities and intersecting interests. Heaven's engineer no longer steered the great locomotives, and everything lay derailed. It took a keen mind to plot it out, if only to follow the fragmented fuses of possibilities leading elsewhere.

Ahrimal stared at Ms. Collings, his divinity staining the air like the scent of honeysuckles. She dropped the phone, her eyes wide with revelation. Ahrimal didn't bother hiding his nature. He wanted her to see'*him*, to feel the cross weighing heavily on her neck. Ms. Collings' fortune unraveled before him, a long worn string piercing tomorrow with an unwavering, straight certainty. She was a creature of habit, one whose lot would change only when the fates brushed against her. Otherwise, she wouldn't alter her course. Her path was set and hard, like concrete. The bitter images flocked to him, as though hungry for an audience:

Snap... Ms. Collings lived an empty, untrusting existence behind a triple-bolted apartment door. She was as much imprisoned by it as protected...

Snap... Ms. Collings visiting someone's grave every Sunday. The tombstone read Marcus...

Snap... She loved Marcus dearly. She spent hours looking through old photo albums of them as children... Marcus was her brother. She smiled only for him.

Snap... Snap... Snap

Ahrimal hated the sight sometimes. He felt sympathy when he didn't want to. He hoped to be free, to act holy in his retribution, to believe Ms. Collings embittered and cruel....

But she wasn't.

She was lonely and afraid, and her only real friend was six feet too far away.

Ahrimal stood up, meridians and parallels of light dancing across his skin, revealing the patterns of a Heaven he once remembered. His wings unfolded; he looked like a diagram, a blueprint of divine inspiration.

Ms. Collings fell to her knees behind the desk.

Ahrimal smiled kindly. "Marcus is worried about you," he said, his voice soft like the dusk surf, his words sparkled with Chaldean and Enochian inflection.

"Marcus?" Ms. Collings whispered, looking up. "Is he..."

"With God... and happy" Ahrimal said, spinning white lies even though he didn't want to give God such credit. "Marcus worries about you, though. You shelter yourself in fear and wrap yourself in memories like a comfortable blanket. You may follow God's word, June, but that's not enough. You merely exist. You don't celebrate His gift or Marcus's love for you."

"How can I?" Her voice cracked with pain. "Is there anything left for me here?"

"If you look," Ahrimal said. "But you must look. You must share the smile you once reserved for Marcus alone. You must give of yourself, first."

"But... where do I start?"

"Away from here. This place is cold and heartless."

"Ironbrook."

"Las Vegas."

Ahrimal offered his hand. He saw no happiness for Ms. Collings here.

Ms. Collings accepted his hand, cautiously, before rising. As she did, Ahrimal's countenance fell away, leaving behind Liebner with his crafted looks.

"Los Angeles is in bad shape," he said. "They could use help healing their wounds."

"Who are you?" Ms. Collings asked, wonder blazing in her imperial green eyes.

Ahrimal bit his tongue. Anger and hatred toward God welled in his throat and he wanted to spit those memories out. He wanted Ms. Collings to know the truth. He wanted to throw the curtain back, but that would solve nothing. He hated God, but not enough to shatter this poor woman's life. Who was he to destroy someone's faith if he wasn't ready to replace it? That would make him as bad as God. "A messenger, June." Ahrimal said. "A messenger who needs your help."

She paused, confused. "Hammil?" she finally asked.

"Hammil is far more dangerous than he appears. I must see his records."

"Of course," Ms. Collings offered, rushing to the computer and setting her fingers into a dancing frenzy across the keyboard. A moment later, Hammil's records appeared. Ahrimal studied them quickly, looking for any pertinent information. The first fact that struck him was Hammil's first name: Darren. The second thing he noticed were Darren's *intact* fingerprints. The third tidbit of information, however, almost floored Ahrimal. It was another name, one he hadn't expected.

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Ahrimal slipped into his car, his disguise falling away and revealing a perplexed man. Darren Hammil was brought to Ironbrook about six months ago after severely beating his lover, another man named Dan Barclay. The lover didn't press charges, but Darren was still committed on the judge's authority. Ahrimal didn't know medical English well enough to figure out the specifics of the report, but he did catch "multiple personality disorder" and "a propensity for violent outbursts." Ahrimal also noticed one other troubling annotation: "No

REM registered during sleep." The doctors administered a cocktail of drugs to keep him sedated, and they kept him straight-jacketed. Finally, Darren's condition deteriorated, and he slipped into a coma. The perfect receptacle for Elohim set loose from the Abyss, souls in need of bodies to possess.

Still, this wasn't the most troubling affair in Hammil's records. Ahrimal needed to speak with Thaol first before questioning Darren's lover, who was listed in the file for emergencies.

III

Ahrimal found Thaol sitting at a table, looking haggard and agitated. He bristled with bad energy.

"You seem upset," Ahrimal said, sitting down as well.

"My supervisor... fucking cunt," he said, seething and flushed with blood, "doesn't like me spending my breaks on the floor. I told her to go fuck herself."

Ahrimal didn't like the way Thaol was acting. He was burning, almost brutal, like the Thaol Ahrimal remembered.

"Darren," Ahrimal said, carefully modulating his tone. "What's your last name, the one you chose for yourself."

"What's that matter?" Thaol said, his body a flurry of nervous energy. "Did you find anything out or not?"

"Your last name?" Ahrimal said again.

"Hamel."

"H-A-M-M-I-L?" Ahrimal asked.

"No. One-M-E-L."

"And you said your host had no memories?"

"No, God dammit! What's with the fucking questions?"

"Because," Ahrimal said, sitting back, "your host's original name *is* Darren Hammil."

"Bullshit!"

"No, and I bet that name seemed very right when you picked it."

"It did," Thaol, said, his eyes darting.

"Why are you so upset?" Ahrimal asked.

"I told you... that bitch..."

"I don't think that's it. There's something you aren't telling me, Thaol."

Thaol looked out across the hall. He chewed on the tip of his thumb before turning back to Ahrimal. "Remember I said I've been dreaming about… hurting people."

"*Ja.*"

"Well… they *were* dreams, until two weeks ago. That's when I tried finding you."

"Did you hurt anyone?"

"No," Thaol said, horrified with the possibility. "Not yet, at least. But about two weeks ago, the dreams began appearing when I was awake."

"Like hallucinations?"

"No, like being transplanted. I'd be elsewhere…."

"I know this is difficult," Ahrimal said, slipping into the familiar role of police confidante, "but I need to know what you saw."

"I…" Thaol began. "Sometimes… I was back in the Abyss, terribly alone and isolated from everyone, or I was devouring mortals who summoned me. Sometimes… I was Letbeg, the Turk, torturing people."

"Wait," Ahrimal said, confused. "The dreams were of you… what you did as Thaol?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes the dreams belonged to my host… I think. I'm standing over a table… there's usually a child or woman tied and gagged. I'm torturing them…"

"With a blowtorch."

Thaol nodded, his shoulders sagging. "The scary part is… it's not the tortures or murders that scare me… it's the moments I'm back in the Abyss, in its iron cold *nothingness*."

"I think your host has memories," Ahrimal said, "things you're remembering slowly. That's why Darren Hamel seemed like a good name. It was familiar. Only… you inadvertently altered the spelling, so your name was never flagged when you applied for work here."

"What else did you find?" Thaol asked, his tone numb.

"That you were in Ironbrook after severely beating," he paused, "your boyfriend."

"My what?!" Thaol said, his voice rising several octaves and hitting Ahrimal like a spike through the skull.

"You mean you haven't felt any... desire," Ahrimal asked, stumbling for the words.

"I'm not a fag!"

"No... I'm sure you're not. But your host was gay...."

"*I'm not a fag!!*" Thaol roared. He shot to his feet, grabbing the edge of the table with both hands and flipping it high into the air, sending a shower of spilt cocktails and peanuts on Ahrimal. The table crashed a moment later into Ahrimal's chair, but he'd already moved. Everyone was looking. The pit boss was already scrambling security there fast.

"I'm not a fag! I've fucked plenty of cunt in my life. Plenty! And I had them screaming for more."

"Thaol," Ahrimal said through his teeth. "Calm yourself. Before I put you down."

"I know all about your *kind*," Thaol said, hissing back.

"You're letting your host's memories affect you." Ahrimal said, eyeing the approaching security.

"What are you talking about, detective?" Thaol said with an ugly grin. His voice changed inflection slightly. "I... never... left."

Security arrived in the form of four apes, crammed into suits. They quickly flanked Ahrimal and Thaol, but respectfully kept their distance. They were trained not to make a scene. Ahrimal, however, wasn't worried about them so much as he was about Thaol. Thaol's expression went from arrogant and cocky to wide-eyed and frightened.

"Gentlemen, will you come with us," the largest ape said.

"What just happened?" Thaol asked Ahrimal, panic mounting in his voice.

"You tell me," Ahrimal said.

"Gentlemen, we don't want to make a scene, but..." the ape said.

"Liebner..." Thaol said.

"...if you don't come with us quietly..."

"I'm not alone..." Thaol said.

"...we will drag you out of here."

"There's someone here with me," Thaol said, his eyes wide and frightened.

* * *

Ahrimal fell into the hotel bed with a great sigh. He'd just spent the last two hours talking with the hotel manager and his well-dressed apes. Thaol accepted blame for the confrontation, even though he didn't remember half the argument. The hotel, however, fired Thaol after agreeing not to press charges. Pressing charges wasn't good press for Vegas casinos, especially when it was against employees.

This was all leading toward an inevitable conclusion Ahrimal didn't like. Still, he had two last avenues to check before making his final decision. He grabbed the telephone and dialed a long string of numbers.

"Detective Boch," a voice announced in German.

"Boch, you ugly mutt, how are you?" Ahrimal said, smiling. It felt good to speak German again, like a long, lazy stretch after a grueling day of work.

"Gerhard? You cantankerous old bastard... I'd like to see you, just so I can spit in both your eyes."

"What is it now?" Ahrimal asked. This was ritual for the two men. In these moments, Ahrimal almost forgot he wasn't really Liebner... almost.

"Those prints you sent me." Boch said, "Where'd you get them?"

"I'm helping a friend with a problem."

"Some problem, Gerhard."

"What's happening?" Ahrimal asked.

"The FBI is asking how we got these prints. I sent them through Interpol as you asked, and they sent them through AFIS. A match came up almost immediately through VICAP."

"VICAP?"

"It's a division of the FBI and something called the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes. They have a network program called the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, which collects and collates information on unsolved violent crimes."

"And the prints I sent appeared there?"

"Yes, in six murders. Four women and two children were raped, tortured with—get this—a blowtorch and dismembered."

"When?"

"Over the course of four years, but the last one was three years ago. All around the Great Lakes."

"And no leads?" Ahrimal asked.

"None, except for two partial, scarred prints and some semen samples. You just provided them with their most complete set of prints."

"Wait. They recognized the scarred prints... the partials?

"Yes, why?"

Ahrimal hadn't expected this. He thought, perhaps, Thaol had scarred Darren's fingers ripping open the window mesh to escape. His prints were normal when they registered him at Ironbrook, after all. If his prints were scarred when Darren murdered those people, then why did they heal before the hospital and scar again the exact same way afterward? Ahrimal's mind was swimming with possibilities, but only one made any real sense.

"Did you tell the FBI where you got the prints from?" Ahrimal asked.

"I told them it had to do with a smuggling operation here..."

Which was partially true, Ahrimal thought.

"...but they want to know how. What am I supposed to do? You put me in a terrible situation."

"I'm sorry," Ahrimal said. He hadn't expected it to degrade like this.

"Can you give me anything?" Boch asked.

Ahrimal sighed. "Tell the FBI it was an anonymous tip, an informant protecting his identity. Tell them to check the Ironbrook Mental Hospital in Las Vegas for a recent escaped mental patient. His prints match, except for the scars."

Boch chuckled on the other line. "You know Gerhard, you really know how to pick your friends."

Ahrimal hung up grumbling. This was messy. When Darren beat his boyfriend, his prints were missing the scars, which meant the AFIS computers would overlook the match completely. The Vegas police and Ironwood never realized they had a killer on their hands. Regardless, once the FBI checked Ironwood and assumed jurisdiction, they'd be far more thorough in their investigation, including checking variations on Darren's name.

They were going to find him, but Ahrimal doubted the FBI could handle Thaol, especially given his display today. No, Ahrimal was going to have to do this himself, but only after he verified one last concern, a suspicion about the fingerprints. He dialed a second phone number.

◆ ◆ ◆

Eros was the hottest gay bar in Vegas. With monthly events like drag shows, foam parties and blackout nights, it attracted its fair share of fit, young gay men, fag hags, curious straight couples and old queens looking to recapture yesterday's glory. Liebner, however, felt out of his element. The mortal Gerhard wasn't homophobic, but certainly homo-squeamish, as his friend Dak once called him. Ahrimal could have cared less about gender preference, or gender for that matter, but he sometimes found Gerhard's sensibilities manifesting themselves through his body language. He tensed up when a shirtless and perfectly toned boy toy brushed past him with a lascivious smile. He spun around when someone playfully cupped his ass. The returned Ahrimal wasn't homophobic... but he would have preferred being elsewhere.

Ahrimal had called Dan Barclay, Darren's ex-lover, using the records from Ironbrook. His roommate said he was working *Eros* tonight. When Ahrimal asked what Dan looked like, he received an earful of harsh and crackly laughter over the phone. "Everybody knows Dan," the roommate said, before hanging up.

Now, at *Eros*, covered in a pulsing beat that shivered his bones, Ahrimal saw what the roommate meant. Scattered around the lit dance floor were elevated, circular podiums speared by brass poles. Gyrating on these mini-stages were go-go boys, the thong-clad Dan Barclay included. He was perfectly proportioned, with muscles cut to sculpted perfection, dark chocolate skin glistening with sweat, and a smooth, bald head framing a handsome, imperial face one would expect from African royalty. He was Leonardo DaVinci's perfect specimen draped in skin as tight and dark as black vinyl. Gathered at his feet was a large crowd of admirers, and he played them like a skilled juggler.

Barclay eventually stepped down with a bow, kissing admirers on the cheek as he passed them by. Ahrimal pushed his way through the crowd, ignoring the complaints. He leaned in to speak to Barclay, who looked very bemused with the situation.

"I'm Detective Liebner...." he said, but Barclay interrupted him.

"Great!" he said.

"I think more policemen should come out of the closet."

"I'm here about Darren Hammil. Where can we talk?"

That shut Barclay up fast. He turned from the crowd with barely a glance and moved to a secluded lounge at the back of the club. A couple of admirers tried following, but Ahrimal stiff-armed them back. A few challenged his glare, but none followed.

Barclay sat down on a plush red sofa in the quiet lounge. There were some people here, but not enough to disturb them.

"So, you finally catch him?" Barclay asked.

"Not exactly," Ahrimal said.

"What's 'not exactly?'" Barclay asked, his attitude getting the better of his manners.

"Not exactly means the police wouldn't know what to do with him... would they?"

Barclay shrugged.

"What I find odd," Ahrimal said, "is your number at Ironbrook Hospital."

"In case of emergencies... So?"

"He beat you."

"I have bad taste in men."

"Or, you're afraid of him."

"Wouldn't you be?" Barclay said, challenging Ahrimal's stare. "First he says he loves me—and he's great in bed—then he flips out and screams he isn't queer."

"That's when he hurt you?"

"We're together for two months, and everything's divine. I mean we even talked about flying out to Denmark to get married. Then one night we're in bed, and he turns real ugly. Pulls a Harding and beats the crap out of me. The police arrest him, and he's completely crazy. I don't want to press charges, but because he hurt some cops, the court sentences him to Ironbrook."

Ahrimal nodded, but there was one question that needed answering.

"Did he ever tell you his real name?" Ahrimal said. "His angelic name."

Barclay's eyes widened and his skin blanched, the blood draining from his face in rapid beats.

"Was it Corbaiyus?"

Barclay was trembling. "You're one of them?" he said with a mixture of fear and awe.

Ahrimal nodded solemnly and locked eyes with Barclay. "Listen carefully," he said, "I'm only here to find out what happened."

Barclay nodded, his throat dry and cracked.

"The medical records say Darren was suffering from multiple personality disorder," Ahrimal said. "One personality called itself Corbaiyus, a former ally of mine. What happened to him?"

It took a few moments before Barclay could finally speak again. Ahrimal had to buy him a beer to settle his nerves and wet his throat. Finally...

"Corbi was an angel... my angel," Barclay said, his voice touched with a vulnerable tenderness Ahrimal hadn't expected. "He told me about your kind, what you went through... God, it was so awful."

"Did he tell you about the host, Darren?"

"He found Darren in a hospital in Denver, in a coma," Barclay said. "Corbi said he sort of fell into the body, like gravity pulling him down. That's how he described it. When he woke up, the guy's memories were a blank, but his ID said Darren Hammil."

"Let me guess," Ahrimal said. "He found a hole in Darren, one where he could shove all his anger and hatred?"

Barclay nodded.

"Did he say why he left Denver, why he moved here?"

"He said other angels kept mistaking him for somebody else. Someone bad."

"Who?"

"Somebody named... Vekabo? Vekanable?"

"Veckonablos?"

"That's it!" Barclay said.

"Go on," Ahrimal said, masking the cold flush numbing the pit of his stomach.

"Well, Corbi came here, and we met and fell in love."

"Did you enter a pact with him?" Ahrimal asked, his customary bluntness in true, shining form.

Barclay sat silent, forcing Ahrimal to ask again.

"Okay, yes, I entered a pact with him. But I still loved Corbi."

"What did he offer you?"

Barclay lapsed into silence again until Ahrimal jabbed him with his finger.

"Hey! Okay... he gave me this body, this physique, and..."

"And?"

"And... this color. I'm... not actually black. My parents are Chinese and Filipino."

Ahrimal couldn't stifle his laughter. He turned away from the indignant young man.

"It's not funny!"

"It's not, you're right," Ahrimal finally said, turning back again, his composure intact. "But that would explain why Darren's fingerprints changed. If he could transform you, then the fingerprints were no trouble."

"Corbi told me... He was afraid Darren had done something bad as a mortal. He removed the scarring when they took his prints, so they wouldn't find him."

"Why didn't he change them completely?"

Barclay took a deep breath. "He was losing control of his... *powers*, I guess. They were vanishing. He said it was like the hole inside him was eating him slowly. And the more he lost, the nastier he got."

"Do you know why he slipped into a coma?" Ahrimal asked.

Barclay shrugged. "The last the doctors told me, he wasn't dreaming anymore and the doctors said he couldn't survive without it. They drugged him up, saying it would help him sleep, but I think he scared them. He was stronger than he looked."

Ahrimal nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Barclay," he said.

The young man nodded. "Is he coming after me?" he asked.

Ahrimal shook his head. "No, Mr. Barclay. I don't think he's Corbaiyus any more."

Barclay nodded, his head dropping from the weight of his memories.

"But consider yourself honored," Ahrimal said. "It's not trust we offer lightly. Few people have the honor of loving the angel, and not the mortal."

IV

Four hours till dawn, and Vegas had no intention of falling asleep just yet. Ahrimal ignored the people around him and simply walked, alone in his thoughts. The fallen possessed those rare mortals who had lost their souls, usually due to trauma or despair. Gerhard Leibner had been worn away by daily grind of trying to hold back the tide of shit on Berlin's streets. But not Darren Hammil. He had a rabbit hole in his soul. Is that where he hid to entice demons into his body, or was he a victim somehow, only emerging once possessed? Did his memories remain with him wherever he fled or was this a survival mechanism to maintain autonomy from the invader? Ahrimal didn't know, and was rarely given to idle conjecture or passing fancy. He relied on facts, and the facts were that Darren Hammil was a serial killer, with six confirmed murders, and probably more buried between here and the Great Lakes. For some reason, he attracted demons like a Venus flytrap, allowing them to settle in before absorbing them. Already three demons had fallen for his lure: Veckonablos, Corbaiyus, and now Thaol. Those were the ones he knew about. There were probably more, but again… conjecture.

Still, that didn't stop the questions and assumptions from arising: Darren was probably repressing homosexual tendencies, which manifested in Corbaiyus and the others the same way his name crept into their thoughts. Darren's sexuality, however, didn't really matter. Regardless, Ahrimal had no intention of psychoanalyzing Darren. That would be left to better minds than his.

Instead, Ahrimal looked up and found himself standing in front of the gun store he'd seen advertised in the Yellow Pages. He peered inside.'*What's at stake here*, he thought to himself, *is that Darren was stalking, torturing and murdering a different kind of victim, demons.* He was a new type of serial killer, one hunting the ultimate prey in their own thoughts. That must be a powerful intoxicant.

Ahrimal ducked into the alley adjoining the gun store and rattled some doors before finding a back door to a 24-hour diner. He stepped through; two separate points in reality pinched together for a brief second, linking the diner door with the gun store's bathroom door. His arm hairs bristled and his eyes blurred slightly at the shift in light waves. A few moments later, he reappeared, tucking a loaded .44 magnum into his waistband.

Darren couldn't live.

* * *

Ahrimal drifted back into the Amazon near 4:00 a.m. Some people were still gambling, and this suited Ahrimal. He needed alibis if he was going to kill Darren. The security cameras in the gambling halls and elevators would record his presence in the hotel. All he had to do was order breakfast from the 24-hour kitchen, and "pinch" himself to Thaol's home through the hotel's bathroom door. Nobody would see him leave. He would have his alibi when the police questioned Thaol's coworkers and the hotel told them about the incident. Only...

Ahrimal didn't know if he could kill someone in cold blood. Once, before he found Gerhard bleeding in an alleyway, he could have murdered easily and happily. This execution, however, bothered him. It wasnÐ't part of him anymore. It felt like a pile of filthy clothing he'd once discarded but was now forced to wear again. Gerhard Liebner, the mortal, had a great many compunctions about this course of action, but Ahrimal didn't have to be Gerhard if he didn't want to... he just *liked* being Gerhard. He respected him, and as silly as it sounded, he felt like he was about to betray him.

Unfortunately, Darren settled the question for him. Ahrimal opened the door to find a gun pointing straight at his face. Darren motioned him in with a cold smirk, and backed into the room after Ahrimal closed the door.

"Thaol?" Ahrimal asked.

"Darren," he said, motioning Ahrimal to sit down.

"You know they'll come looking for you," Ahrimal said, dropping into a chair. "If they find me dead, the hotel will mention our fight, and they'll come after you."

"You see, detective," Darren said with a broad smile. His face dissolved, like melting wax with personal initiative. He turned into a woman in her forties, with black frizzy hair and a hard cut to her wrinkles. "I was never actually here. But my cunt of a supervisor was. Say hello." Darren waved.

"Corbaiyus?"

"No, *Corbi's* a goner, but he taught me some things before I ate him up.

"How?"

"Wish I could say. I just get them once you viruses stop fighting the digestion process."

"What happened... at Ironbrook?" Ahrimal asked.

"Fucking Corbaiyus," Darren said, shifting his features back. "Corbaiyus fought me long enough for the doctors to keep me doped up. I couldn't do anything, and slipped back in."

"Into the hole?"

"Into that fucking hole," Darren said, almost spitting hot saliva. "That hole kept eating my dreams. Doctors said I was suffering from a degenerative encephalopathic condition, but they didn't know what it was. They couldn't figure out why I wasn't dreaming anymore, but I knew. It was that fucking hole."

"That puts you in the coma..."

"Slowly. Doctors say my brain can't cope without REM, so it eventually shuts down. I tried sacrificing other victims to the hole, to dream again, but it wouldn't let me. I would have died, a vegetable in some Columbus Hospital, but that's when you guys came along."

"I don't get it," Ahrimal said, encouraging Darren to talk and drop his guard. Darren just kept rambling, the gun sight drilled into Ahrimal's forehead with unwavering intent. "How do we fit in?"

"I don't know, but you heal my brain and feed the hole until it's no longer hungry. Then it lets me crawl out again, and dream your memories."

"But, eventually," Ahrimal said. "It eats your dreams again..."

"I fall back into the hole. But see... that doesn't bother me anymore because it's gotten a taste for you viruses," Darren said. "It'll keep snaring you bastards and eventually, I'll crawl back out again. I couldn't do shit before, but now... Lobbata, Corbaiyus, Veckonablos, Thaol... you have no idea what those fuckers taught me."

"They taught you all their gifts?" Ahrimal said, horrified. Darren's victims all belonged to different houses, all gifted by God in different ways at the dawn of creation. All were highly capable.

"And memories. I love your species, detective. It's like watching a fucking movie with all six senses. Do you know what it's like," Darren said, almost shaking with excitement, "to watch yourself fight *other angels*... to knock stars and planets off their orbits, to boil a fucking ocean?!"

"*Ja,*" Ahrimal said, "I was there, remember?"

"I want to see more, detective. I want to see the battlefields through the eyes of Lucifer or Beelzebub. I want Typhon's dragon savagery or Abaddon's wasting gaze."

"This isn't a game," Ahrimal said, his voice sharp as a slap. These memories were painful, and more traumatic than any human experience could fathom, but Darren treated them like a bauble, like so much of Las Vegas's distractions... big, bright, fast and empty. "You're touching primordial powers beyond your reckoning, child," Ahrimal said, his voice losing Leibner's human tones. Within it lay the cold depths of space, the void of the universe. The cartographer's meridians flowed across his skin and creation unraveled in the depths of his shadows. He spoke and the room trembled in fear. He stood, and wings flowed from his back.

Darren shook his head, tears streaming down his face, but his gun still leveled at Ahrimal's head. "And I want to do"*that,*" he said. "I want to look like you...."

Darren pulled the trigger.

* * *

Ahrimal was already moving when Darren squeezed off a shot, narrowly missing his head with a hot metal hiss. The bullet punched high into the wall behind him. A second shot, muffled by Ahrimal's right arm when he slammed into Darren, shuddered deep into his biceps, spraying blood as it exited the triceps. Ahrimal's countenance fell away like mist on a strong wind; Gerhard Leibner's form grunted in pain and fell back, towards the bathroom, pushing Darren off- balance. Darren, however, had the advantage and drew a bead on Ahrimal again.

Ahrimal leapt for the bathroom door and vanished through the portal, two points in space pinched together again.

The wounded detective reappeared through the men's bathroom door in the Amazon's shopping plaza, now closed for the night. He'd established this emergency escape route after first meeting Darren.

Fake trees and jungle-hut facades ran the length of the highway-wide lanes, while a river wound a lazy course through the mall. Ahrimal headed for the atrium space, where fake South American ruins and a temple archway sprouted from a nest of plastic brush amid a sea of tables. Darren suddenly appeared from the bathroom as well, gun drawn and ready. He spotted Ahrimal running between the table aisles and opened fire, gouging thumb-size holes in the Formica tabletops. Ahrimal jumped through the archway, another gate to escape Darren. He stumbled through the rend framed by the tilted door of another temple ruin, and nearly fell into an artificial Amazon canal. Somewhere behind him, in the collapsing pocket where air gasped at his sudden vacancy, a bullet tore through the empty space. A second later, Ahrimal heard the gunshot ricochet through the empty mall's faux green streets and tinsel-town facades.

Ahrimal looked around quickly, catching Polaroid impressions of his surroundings... the tribal-hut facades, the wooden bridge over a shallow river filled with colorfully etched fish, the painted sky arching languidly over the street. It all seemed sinister now, after hours, without the press of humanity or the chatter of footsteps and Muzak.

Darren was tracking Ahrimal through Thaol's innate senses, the ones that pinpointed infernal breaks in reality's logic. It would take Darren a moment to determine his rough position. Ahrimal drew his gun and dropped into a cluster of trees near the river. He waited for Darren to appear. Instead, however, the solitary click-clack of Darren's shoes echoed through the halls. A minute passed before Ahrimal saw him casually walking down the lane. Darren lifted his arm and made a swirling motion. Behind Ahrimal, a set of trees exploded into flame. The overhead vines acted like fuses across which the fire crawled to adjoining trees. The sprinkler system kicked on, sending a spray of rain across the lanes.

"Great," Ahrimal muttered to himself.

Darren laughed. "You know what's really funny?" he yelled out over the patter hitting the floor. "Eventually, the hole will claim one of your big fish... and then, I'll be on a first-name basis with everyone."

Ahrimal groaned to himself. He hadn't considered that before, but if Darren discovered their true names, there was no telling what he could do. Darren had to die.

Darren continued forward, gun in one hand, the other hand ready to wield a fundamental force of the universe. Ahrimal knew it was a gamble, but it was one Darren wouldn't be expecting. Hopefully, he hadn't learned the patterned instincts of being a card-carrying member of divinity, the ones that turned these powers from trinkets into extensions of one's nature.

Darren wasn't expecting Ahrimal to openly charge him, screaming like a lunatic, but there he was, two seconds away from barreling into him. Instinctively, Darren raised his gun first, firing once, then twice through the illusion. That's all Ahrimal needed to know. His adversary's instincts were still human... not demonic.

And Darren was off-balance.

The illusion flew through Darren, who spun around, startled by the effect. It was the break Ahrimal needed. He rushed through the curtain of water, toward Darren, who was turning around. Ahrimal tackled him hard, into a store window. They were about to break the glass, but Ahrimal had other plans. He called on the darkest reflection of the portals, opening a doorway into the Abyss's daughter, the blighted shadowlands between everyday reality and Dante's fevered deliriums. The storefront window shattered into jagged teeth that guarded the twisted storm's hungry maw. Shadow-creatures, howling, distended and stretched on the racks of gales, scrabbled at the gateway's edge to escape.

Darren screamed as they both fell through, into the black storm. "The Hole! *No*!"

The rupture closed, reality cauterizing the seams of the tear. Winds tore through the two men like hurricane-propelled razors, and the shadows clambered over them for purchase. The storm whipped them around, threatening to snap their necks. Ahrimal was tired, exhausted from the effort, but he had one last parting gift for the monster. His wings erupted, lined with iron gears and sharp cogs, while the meridian patterns played themselves out across his form, a scrolling map of creation. Ahrimal grasped a screaming Darren by the shoulders and shouted, "Reap your fate, and that of your victims. Oblivion awaits you."

Darren's eyes widened in terror. He was now in the clutches of his personal demon. Fear-born faith streamed from his eyes and mouth, reinvigorating Ahrimal for that last push back.

Ahrimal pushed Darren away, spinning off into the storm and screaming. The demon opened the vortex through his bathroom door.

The gateway shut closed, but the scream lingered in Ahrimal's ears.

* * *

Ahrimal lay against a wall, oblivious to the fire alarms blaring in the hallway, the one that masked the howl of the closing gate. When hotel security finally knocked on his door a couple of hours later (after tending to the mess downstairs), Ahrimal claimed the gunshot his neighbor heard was from his television. A simple illusion covered the blood on the carpet and the hole in the wall; Ahrimal had already healed his wound and changed clothing.

Hotel security watched Ahrimal carefully the next day until he checked out, not that they had any evidence of wrongdoing. None of the cameras saw Ahrimal leave his room after he came back last night, so they had no proof of his involvement in anything. Ahrimal suspected they probably didn't get a good look at his face, or they didn't believe anything of what they saw. The water spray must have obscured much of the relevant details anyway. Regardless, the news said nothing of the incident, which meant the hotel probably paid good money to hush up the matter.

Meanwhile, Ahrimal spent a few hours cleaning the blood from the carpet after pilfering industrial strength cleaner from the maid's cart and stripping a small section of wallpaper from behind the television cabinet. He used that to cover the bullet hole in the wall, lining up the patch with the floral patterns and covering it up using glue he'd purchased downstairs. It was crude, but effective.

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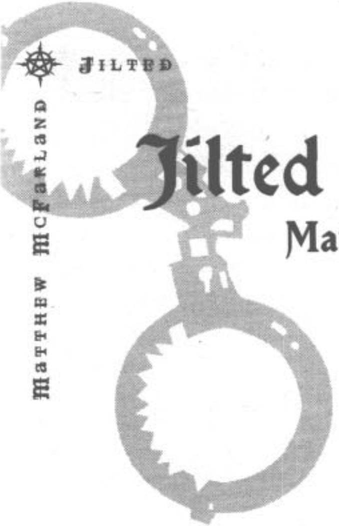
The bellhop arrived at Ahrimal's door to take his bag. He smiled, but Ahrimal couldn't muster the energy to care. Throwing Darren into the shadowlands was cruel justice, execution through dissolution. Darren died—his will broken, his body shredded—one epidermal layer at a time. It wasn't a kind fate, and Ahrimal would pay for that cruelty. Already, he felt the call of the Abyss and the razor-edged short temper return. He felt angrier, cagier. He knew he'd slid back slightly, destroying months of altruism and charity. All in a moment.

"Did you enjoy your stay, sir," the bellhop asked on the elevator ride down.

"Not really," Ahrimal said. He thought of Darren screaming. "I preferred Los Angeles."



Jilted

Matthew McFarland

Brenda Gary sat alone in her dressing room. She would not be going onstage tonight. Her manager pounded on the door, demanding to be let in. Her manager was a Christian, and along with the throng outside the concert hall, he wanted some answers about the pictures that had been printed in the local paper. The pictures showed Brenda Gary, teen idol, rising pop star and born-again Christian, locking lips with another woman. The other woman's face wasn't clear in the photo, and the press had yet to identify her. Brenda knew her as Jan, and Jan had shown her many things.

Jan had shown her how to kiss. Brenda had kissed boys, but it had always left her unsatisfied and from that she concluded kissing was sinful. The fact that kissing Jan left her very satisfied indeed confused her terribly, because she knew kissing another woman was sinful.

Jan had shown her how to dance. Although Brenda Gary was graceful and her body perfectly proportioned, she had never had a good sense of rhythm until Jan came along. She helped Brenda relax into the beat and then move with it, until it became instinctual… much like kissing.

Jan had shown her sex. Brenda had never had sex, not even petting before. She wore her virginity like a badge, and the most commonly used photo of her in every magazine article in the world was the one of her wearing a white T-shirt that said *Chased But Still Chaste*. She had spoken against premarital sex in countless high schools all over the country and preached abstinence through her songs (*Waiting* was currently number eight on the Top Forty but would assuredly fall before long). But with Jan it was different. Jan didn't rush her and didn't shove or prod her, the way she'd always imagined a man would. Jan's hands were soft and her mouth indescribably hot. Sex with a woman couldn't be a sin because it left Brenda feeling so clean, even though she knew that it was a sin because the Bible said so.

Jan had shown Brenda a lot about herself. When Jan called earlier in the evening and said she couldn't make it to the show, Brenda was disappointed but consoled herself with the memories of the night before. And then those memories were on the front page of the local paper, and people were outside the concert hall with signs, some bedecked with rainbows and encouragement, others with pictures of fire and accusations of sin. But the worst of all was a plain white sign carried by a girl of about sixteen, wearing a gold cross and a white T-shirt. The sign read *Brenda, You Lied to Us.*

Brenda was locked in her dressing room, and she wasn't going to perform ever again. She figured this was what Hell felt like.

Outside, the girl with the white sign set it down and walked off. Once out of sight, her hair lengthened and darkened, her breasts swelled and her clothes became less crisp and more comfortable. She looked nothing like the photo on the front page of the local paper, and nothing like the sixteen-year-old that she'd been a moment before, even though she was both women. She looked back at the crowd and wondered if Brenda would "come out," apologize to her fans, give in, die or fade away.

She rather hoped Brenda would disappear from the public eye, known forever as the "born-again dyke." She realized, on some level, that these thoughts were cruel and that she would miss Brenda's bubbling idealism and pure, if confused, faith. But Sabriel knew about cruelty and love, and most of all she knew about Hell. The little girl wearing cotton panties that still smelled of the night before and the morning after didn't know a damned thing.

Sabriel walked away and hailed a cab. She didn't think of Brenda again until weeks later, when Nolan dripped wax from a votive candle on her skin with Bach playing softly in the background. Even then, she laughed at the memory, and that was probably what made Nolan suspicious.

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"Someone who hates you," said the man on the screen, "can hurt you, even kill you. Someone who hates you can fuck you up in nearly all ways imaginable." His eyes shifted right and the camera followed his gaze to a woman sitting in a chair, loosely, as though propped up. "But only someone who loves you can make you cry."

Sabriel had been watching the film intently. She had come to enjoy films about sex and murder, because the two were such polar opposites and yet seemed so intrinsically linked in people's minds. She cocked her head and tested that notion—that only someone who loved you could make you cry—against her own experience and Christina's. She wasn't really interested in the end of the film (she had guessed already that the woman in the chair was dead and had been since the first scene), but the idea that only someone who loved her could make her cry...

She had loved everyone, once. All people, because she knew that they held music and poetry in their hearts that could make her beautiful, that could make her *true*. At the time, she wasn't quite capable of crying—angels could cry, but it meant something rather different than the purging of water through tear ducts. She tried to explain it to herself with Christina's experiences and got as far as "collapsing on the floor, three teeth loose, jaw bleeding and clutching stomach" before giving up. Christina, the woman whose body Sabriel had usurped upon escaping, had known pain, but not the pain of angel's tears.

And yet, she had loved the man who had reduced her to that state. Clearly someone who loved you *could* make you cry, but did that mean that such power was reserved only for such people? Sabriel understood, of course, that the screenwriter hadn't meant the statement literally, but she thought it was a reasonable approximation of an idea that would have taken a downpour, a week of song, a birth, a death and perhaps a moment of rage for color to express properly.

The credits rolled, and her attention wandered from the screen to the people around her. She could hear any conversation in the room, hushed or not. The movie's score was constant and made for the backdrop she needed to hear the rest of the room. Against the quiet roar of the ocean, a bird can be heard for miles, simply because the pitch is so different. Sabriel listened to the lilts and rumbles of the language around her, planning her next move.

Most of the viewers were talking about the film or about the recent earthquake in Los Angeles, neither of which interested Sabriel very much, but some of the conversation was more interesting. Two men were discussing where they might be able to buy some cocaine; neither of them were from Chicago and didn't know the city. Two other men were making a bet on whether either of them could "bang" Sabriel that night, though they referred to her as "the chick with the white dress." Christina might have blushed, even become aroused at that kind of crudity. Sabriel simply felt annoyed. She was wondering how far she could push the rivalry between them—probably not to murder, but at least to a fistfight, which might be enough—when another strain of conversation caught her attention.

"What really sparked the idea was the notion that only someone who loves you can make you cry. It's a Spanish proverb, actually—'*Quien te quiere...*' ah, shit, I forget." Laughter. "But it's a kind of strange thought, isn't it? That we give that power only to the people who love us, not the other way around. Or maybe the Spaniards got it backwards, I don't know." More laughter. Sabriel turned her head ever so slightly and saw a young man talking with a small knot of people. One of them she recognized as a reporter, one was an actor from the film. The man speaking was the screenwriter and director, she decided.

Christina knew about love at first sight, although she could never have explained it. Sabriel knew that even in the world's current state, some things still resonated. Some people still, to use a quaint expression, clicked. That humans had to take things to extremes—this clicking, which meant only a connection and could easily denote friendship or even enmity, was often imagined to be love—but that was one of the things Sabriel loved about them.

Had loved. When she loved them, which she no longer did. A cell phone rang, and the conversation quieted some. She reminded herself how much she hated cell phones—they were an annoyance and an interruption no matter what one was trying to do—when she sensed another demon.

She looked about nervously. She was afraid someone had followed her, although she'd not met many others like herself. Worse, she feared that her superior had gotten free. The sensation was strong, disturbingly so. The air thickened and Sabriel actually thought she smelled brimstone. And then it was gone, and she glanced over to the writer/director.

The click was still there. Six billion people on the planet, and so precious few of them had any kind of real talent. Sabriel was an angel of the Boundless Deeps, and understood one exception in a literal sea of homogeneity. She stood up and made her way to join the conversation. On the way, she asked Christina's memory if this man was attractive. Christina, she decided, would have found him "cute." He wasn't older than twenty-five or so. His hair hadn't receded, and he kept it short and combed back. He wore glasses, but they were thin and stylish, and he didn't wear one single article of black clothing (which made him markedly different than most of the other people here). Christina would have liked his smile and his polite manner. She'd have considered him safe.

Sabriel had learned by now that any man that Christina saw as safe was anything but. Christina had lousy taste in men.

The credits ended and the lights came up. The knot around the director had swollen into a crowd. Sabriel wasn't going to get close enough to him to talk, not now, so she slipped by him and lurked near the doorway. *What does he want?* she thought. And looking, she knew.

He wanted a virgin. He wanted innocence. He wanted a woman who had fantasies, but would never admit to them. He wanted a woman who would stop while giving head and whisper, "Is this right?"

Sabriel was mildly surprised by this. He didn't look the type. He looked like a man with more... *varied* tastes than that. Plus, he was so young; most men who fantasized about schoolgirls were either older men or true perverts (or Japanese). She didn't spend too much time wondering, however. She could see what someone needed in a lover but not why, after all. Possibly he was older than he looked, or maybe he'd just started at a young enough age that he'd gotten his more exotic fantasies out of the way already. It didn't really matter much to Sabriel. She was just glad she'd chosen to wear white. She didn't have to change clothes in order to meet him.

The crowd didn't subside, so Sabriel withdrew. Pity he didn't like aggressive women—she could just push her way through and introduce herself. But she had to be demure, and that meant meeting him in a more casual venue. Or by chance. That would be even better. She needed someone to introduce her to him, possibly at a party, someone who could then just disappear.

The two men who had been making bets on her struggled past the crowd and began walking over to her. She glanced at them and knew their fantasies, and stifled a yawn. Typical American men. They had no fantasies of their own. They'd been masturbating to *Penthouse Letters* and Vivid Video since their high school days, and any original fantasies they might have had were replaced by impossible scenarios: The girl hitchhiker in the miniskirt, the redhead coworker, a buddy's younger sister. Girls who swallow, girls who like anal, girls who would validate their rather tepid perversities by sharing them.

Sabriel knew what it was to want someone to share a dream. She could sympathize with the men. But she was still going to hurt them.

* * *

Sabriel scanned the room but didn't see the director. He was probably fashionably late, she decided. Hopefully, he wasn't going to skip the party. She had outdone herself in the last few hours and she would hate to have the punch line, as it were, left out.

Her escort was limping a bit from where his friend had kicked him in the knee, but he was smiling. Sabriel hung on his arm and tried to remain as wide-eyed and innocent as she could, but she was fighting the urge to laugh. The other man—Dave—was in his hotel room a few floors up, probably still dabbing at his bloodied eye with a tissue. Sabriel's escort—Gavin—hadn't taken off his ring before they'd fought. Sabriel felt smug. She had made men fight over her before, but never in under an hour, and never while maintaining a facade of such innocence.

Gavin had already introduced her to some of the actors from the film. The actress who'd played the dead woman in the chair had also starred in the director's first film, which was a probable Oscar nominee for Best Original Screenplay. Sabriel had not heard of it but feigned open-mouthed awe. It was a subtle dance. Overreact, but slightly, and don't gush. When the actress winks and licks her lips, smile but do so cautiously, as though confused. Sabriel decided that if the director didn't show up, she was going to let the actress almost seduce her instead. Maybe she'd even reveal herself to the actress and gain her loyalty. Maybe she'd promise the actress roles in upcoming blockbusters. Maybe she'd tell the actress that by sucking a particular man's cock, she could get such roles.

"What are you smiling about?" Gavin asked. Sabriel shook her head and glanced up at him. She had only made one change to her body since the screening: She had become a few inches shorter. She needed to be able to look up at men like a child.

"Nothing, I'm just excited." Mysterious wouldn't work. Innocent girls were not mysterious. They might *try* for mysterious, but then it came out clumsy. Sabriel just shot for transparently starstruck. "Is his movie really going to win an Oscar?"

Gavin scoffed. "It might get" *nominated.* Might. But he's already blown his chance at Best Director because he skipped a dinner party with one of the guys on the board a few weeks ago. Speak of the devil," Gavin muttered, and nodded to his left. She glanced over and saw the director stroll into the room. He had no date, which mildly surprised Sabriel, but that meant less work for her. She let Gavin lead her over.

"Hey," said Gavin. "Caught the screening this afternoon. You're gonna win this thing again, you know." Sabriel watched the director's eyes and saw that he wanted to win, even if he pretended otherwise. She smiled, careful to make the smile appear polite and nervous rather than smug. "Like you to meet someone," Gavin continued, indicating Sabriel. "This is Kirsten."

The director smiled, and Gavin motioned toward him. "Kirsten, this is Nolan." Sabriel cast her eyes downward for a few seconds, then looked up and extended her hand. She caught a note of surprise in his face as he shook her hand and mentally scolded herself—*should have let him initiate contact.* But he didn't seem put off. She'd taken care to make sure her hands were cold and slightly sweaty, and that helped.

She said, "It's really an honor to meet you." Behind her, she felt Gavin roll his eyes. Nolan shook her hand and nodded, and asked if it was her first time in Chicago. She said it was, making sure that she'd turned her back on Gavin. She wanted him to go away but couldn't convey that too directly, or Nolan would know she'd been using Gavin to get to him. She might have been giving Nolan too much credit, of course—men were usually poor judges of motivation—but Nolan seemed pretty smart and probably had a writer's eye for nuance.

Gavin, fortunately, helped things along. He dropped his hand to Sabriel's ass, giving her an excuse to squirm and look shocked. Nolan looked up at Gavin and cocked an eyebrow, and Gavin turned beat red. He walked off, muttering something about getting a drink. He was still limping, and had no key to the hotel room he and Dave had been sharing. Sabriel watched him go and shook her head, and turned back to Nolan and whispered, "Can you *believe* him?"

Nolan shook his head. "Some people. You've got to be careful at these things. About half the people in this room aren't even here for the films. They're just looking to get laid."

Testing me with language, thought Sabriel. *Next he'll say "fuck" and see if I get offended.* She giggled nervously. "Get laid" wasn't enough to challenge anyone's sensibilities.

"See the guy over there at the bar?" Sabriel followed Nolan's gaze and saw a man of about forty—white hair, black suit, expensive watch, fantasies about limousines and women with garters. "He shows up at a lot of these kinds of parties. He's nobody, just a second-string millionaire with no taste whatsoever, but he'll pretend he's Joel Silver just to fuck some aspiring actress." Sabriel gave a nervous laugh and gave Nolan an "I can't believe you said that" sort of look. His smile told her what she needed to know: He bought it. She was in.

Something odd, though. Behind his eyes was an odd kind of hunger, not desperation or even desire, but deliberation. He was enjoying the hunt, the seduction, as much as she was. She wondered if he saw through her act, but no, his fantasy virgins now had her face. It was working.

She stuck by his side while he worked the party. The second he stopped paying attention to her, she slipped off and took a seat, nursed her drink and pouted. It took exactly five and a half minutes for him to find her again, and after that he kept her in each conversation, sometimes with obviously pained effort. She made up Kirsten as she went: Theater major at Bowling Green on break, considering taking film classes, supposed to meet a friend here in Chicago but the friend had bailed. Only twenty years old. Lives in an apartment. Achingly obvious virgin. Sabriel watched fantasies change all night, from policewoman to teacher to student to her. Dominants hung over her every word. Once she caught herself acting too comfortable around a woman with close-cropped black hair and had to feign surprise when Nolan told her quietly that the woman was a lesbian.

Nolan invited her up to his room, and she wasn't sure how to proceed. If she refused, she'd reveal that she wasn't so naïve. If she went along, she have to turn him down (no *way* was Kirsten going to let him into her panties on the first date!) and then she might lose him. She told him she had to go to her hotel and check to see if her "friend" had left any messages. She planned to call him from a pay phone and tell him her friend was stuck at the airport and needed a ride, but could she see him tomorrow? That, Sabriel thought, was perfect. Lust delayed, but it's no one's fault. She could sound petulant on the phone and he'd figure it's because she wanted to see him. She could act somewhat tipsy and then apologize in the morning.

She walked out the hotel and down the street, wondering if she should change forms and try to seduce her way into someone's room for the night. She was thinking back to the actress she'd met when Gavin grabbed her shoulder and pulled her into an alley.

Gavin was badly drunk. Sabriel could see traces of vomit in his goatee and on his pants. His shirt was half-unbuttoned and he sported a fresh bruise on his cheek. "Fuckin' bitch," he slurred, and shoved her against the wall.

Sabriel hated looking at the fantasies of drunk men. She saw only stormy seas and sickly, filth-covered *things*. She saw Hell in their minds, and yet she looked, because it reminded her to hate.

Gavin drew back a hand and smacked her across the face. Christina rushed to the fore and Sabriel dropped over and curled up, shaking, before she knew what she was doing. That gave Gavin some pause, and he crouched down next to her.

"Dave fuckin' punched me when I walked in the room, you know that? I don't know how I'm gonna get home." Gavin fell over on one knee and grabbed Sabriel's hair. She decided to give him thirty seconds to walk away. "And then you're all over Nolan's dick in three seconds. Whore!" He jerked on her hair for emphasis. Sabriel didn't even bother crying out. Twenty seconds.

Gavin hooked his hands under her arms and dragged her deeper into the alley. Sabriel wondered if he planned to rape her. His fantasies were starting to gain more color. Rather than a black morass of hate she saw swirling colors—humiliation, lust, rage, rejection. Fifteen seconds.

She tried to stand up, just to see what he'd do. He grabbed her by the face, his palm sweaty and smelling of vodka, and pushed her to her knees. "You wanna play like you don't know how to suck cock? You fucking know how, don't you?" His voice wavered a bit. He was probably expecting her to beg, or scream, or say *something*. Instead she looked straight ahead. She was getting angry. Five seconds.

"You can't just ignore me like that. You can't just reject—"

That did it. Sabriel's head snapped upward, and in one instant of eye contact, she saw that Gavin knew he'd made a mistake. He staggered back, but was too drunk to run. Sabriel didn't bother climbing to her feet, she just *flowed* upwards. Her body grew long, slender and fluid. Her features disappeared and she stood before him as a nightmare, a beautiful and terrifying siren, the Angel of the Boundless Deeps.

"Reject you?" She knew that her voice hurt him. It was every woman's sharp tongue, every ex-lover's mocking dismissal. "Ignore you?" He scrambled backward against the wall and she felt his belief, even drunk, grow. She took it in and caressed it, and then reached out and pulled him to his feet. She was still more than a head taller than him. "For years, you looked out at me and saw only water. You didn't see beauty or song until *I showed you how*. And I rejected you?"

Tears streamed down his face. He was a boy caught masturbating to a beer commercial. He was a man confronted by his wife and his mistress. "I... don't know... what you—"

"I know." Her voice grew sharper, harsh enough to make him bleed, had she so desired. "It wasn't you. But it was your kind. It was all of you." Sabriel grew larger, her arms encircled him. A passerby would have smelled salt water and ozone from the alley. "Ask me to forgive you."

Gavin didn't miss a beat. "Please forgive me?"

The edges of Sabriel's limbs, translucent and glimmering the faint light, moved closer to his mouth. She paused.

"No," she said, and forced the watery hands over his face.

Sabriel walked away, leaving Gavin's waterlogged body next to some garbage cans. She'd leave it to the police to decide how he'd managed to drown on seawater in a Chicago alley. At the moment she had bigger fish to fry.

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The next night, Sabriel wore a cream-colored outfit. It was important that she not wear white again; she wanted Nolan to recognize, even subconsciously, that he'd had an impact on her innocence. But she couldn't go straight to pink or red, and blue was an old lady's color. She sat at the restaurant with him and watched him look uncomfortable.

Nolan was strange. At social gatherings, he was supremely confidant. But here at the restaurant, secluded but not alone, he seemed unsteady. Sabriel thought he looked like he was expecting something, but she didn't think it had to do with her. For her part, she wasn't happy with her surroundings. She wanted him alone but wasn't sure how to get him there without destroying her image. She considered getting drunk and letting him take advantage, but he bought them both a glass of wine (not a bottle) and didn't offer another. He clearly wanted to seduce her on his own, which made her position all the more precarious.

Nolan ate quietly, and they fell to talking about movies. Nolan referenced several that Sabriel hadn't seen, though the titles were familiar. Christina had seen very few American films and was little help when he started comparing them, but that did make it easier to play the part of the confused student. In fact, she was so deeply in the role that when Nolan asked if she'd like to come upstairs and watch a movie with him, she agreed without considering his intentions.

On the elevator up, he kissed her. She let him, tentatively, using her lips but not her tongue, and then relaxed. He ran his fingers through her hair—brown, shoulder length, because too long would be exotic and too short would be butch—and she reminded herself about Gavin and him pulling her hair.

He stepped back. "You okay?"

Sabriel was genuinely confused. Of course she hadn't *really* been enjoying the kiss, but there was no way he could have sensed that. "Yeah, why?"

"You stiffened up a bit. Moving too fast?"

Sabriel shook her head. Even "Kirsten" wouldn't think a kiss in an elevator was too fast.

"I'm a lousy kisser, then?" Nolan smiled. He obviously knew he was a great kisser. Sabriel relented and smiled shyly.

Nolan kissed her again, this time with his arms over his head, on the elevator wall, leaning in over her. She knew his body language was deliberate—he was vulnerable should she decided to knee him and she wasn't at all boxed in.

Smart, Nolan, she thought. She opened her mouth to accept his tongue and allowed Christina to come out a bit.

Christina would have melted completely for him. Nolan's kiss was gentle but expert. He wasn't kissing to seduce, he was kissing to make her feel more comfortable. He was making her feel special. Sabriel pressed her palms against the elevator and shifted her hips a bit. He was making her feel adult, confidant. She reached out and touched his hips, expecting him to thrust them forward, but he only moved close enough that his chest brushed against hers. He was making her wet.

The doors opened and he led her to his room. Clothes on the floor, but in a pile, not strewn about. An open bottle of whiskey from the minibar, but still half full. Two white votive candles on the nightstand next to the bed, along with a book of matches.

Sabriel glanced at his fantasy and saw impatience there—Nolan obviously wanted her. But the impatience was strange. She thought perhaps that he wanted her slowly, maybe oral sex tonight, maybe just a dry-fuck through her panties. He seemed impatient for *something*, but she didn't think it was conquest.

She did, however, feel that Nolan was deeper than she'd originally assessed.

Nolan lowered the lights, but did not, Sabriel noticed, light the candles. He took off his shoes and climbed onto the bed, leaned on the headboard and reached for the remote control. He nodded to a stack of videotapes on the dresser. "Pick one."

Sabriel started looking through them. They were all similar, she guessed, to his films—psychosexual thrillers, *Basic Instinct, Never Talk to Strangers, Disclosure....*

"You always travel with this many movies?"

"Helps me relax. I usually watch movies to wind down at night." He shrugged. "I usually grab eight or ten whenever I travel, just to have some variety.

Sabriel picked *Single White Female.* She hadn't seen it but had heard someone mention a "blowjob scene" the night before. She started the tape and then climbed into bed next to Nolan.

She checked his fantasies a few times during the first hour, but they didn't change. He was still thinking of her and very obviously anticipating something in the movie. Sabriel pretended to be uncomfortable—but slightly aroused—during the sex scenes, laughed quietly when one of the female characters was caught masturbating. When the film was at a low point, she asked if Nolan knew any of the actors.

"Met Tony Goldwyn last year." He chuckled quietly. "Sat near Bridget Fonda at a restaurant in LA. That's about it."

When the blowjob scene came around, Sabriel felt his heart rate quicken. She decided to play into his fantasy a bit. She sat up and watched during the scene, and then asked, "Did he come in her mouth?" in what she hoped was a believably incredulous tone.

"Yeah," he laughed. He didn't press the issue, but Sabriel knew he was thinking about it.

When the movie ended, they talked about it a bit. He said he kept meaning to read the book it was based on. She said the book was always better. They bantered a little about the acting, and since "Kirsten" was a theater student, Sabriel let herself become a bit more animated.

Nolan politely let her finish her thoughts and then kissed her. Again, he didn't grab her shoulders or her hair, but did place one hand on her hip. The kiss was different this time, though. Now he was kissing to seduce.

Sabriel kissed back and let herself moan a little when he kissed her neck. She marveled over the deliberation he put into his kisses—so few men paid any attention to what they were doing, seeing only the ultimate goal rather than the technique of sex. Nolan pulled her back onto the bed but did not mount her or attempt to undress her. They lay side by side, kissing, and then he whispered, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"It's about sex."

"Okay." Sabriel made sure to blush a little.

"Have you ever given a man oral sex?"

Smart, she thought. *Doesn't use obscenity or any language that would make me uncomfortable. Doesn't ask for a blowjob outright—makes it my decision*. "No," she said. *Now he'll just smile, and make me make the next move.*

Nolan smiled and kissed her again. Sabriel almost laughed—she loved being right. She decided to do something risky. She unbuttoned his shirt and kissed down his chest. His skin was smooth and virtually hairless. Christina's boyfriend, like most Greeks, had been extremely hairy, but Christina hadn't known the difference. Sabriel, given the choice, liked men like Nolan better. Not that she liked any men at all, of course.

She reached his belt buckle and undid it, hands shaking convincingly. She unzipped his fly without looking at him, face rosy, breathing through her mouth. He was wearing black cotton boxers with one button on the fly. She scrabbled at it for a moment before giving up and simply moved the elastic waistband down a bit.

He was very clean, and didn't have the strong musk that Christina's boyfriend did. Sabriel didn't look up, didn't check to see if she was moving too fast for his fantasies. She opened her mouth and let the head of his cock slide over the roof her mouth. She was kind enough to curve her lips so that her teeth didn't brush over him, even though she wasn't sure Kirsten would know to do that. She slid her mouth down and closed her lips over him, taking him as far as she could, but keeping her throat closed—she didn't want to come off as too practiced, after all. She listened for the sigh as she started back up and heard it, and flicked her tongue against him.

His hips shifted a bit. She had him. She ducked her head again and this time opened her throat enough to take all of him. She continued, right hand on his stomach, left hand on his thigh. Her eyes closed, concentrating on the feel of his cock against her tongue. Perfect. This was demeaning, she remembered. Degrading to women. She hated it, she reminded herself.

She felt him growing harder and let him slip out of her mouth long enough to whisper, "Is this right?"

"Oh, God, yes," he whispered back. She ducked her head again and sped up slightly. She was slightly conflicted on the notion of swallowing—on the one hand, she knew he would love it and it would only make him more infatuated. On the other, it might put lie to her original claim that she'd never done this before. She decided to wing it.

She flicked her tongue again and felt him swell. He didn't say anything, though, so she decided to let him come in her mouth. A moment later, he did. Rather than making a mess of the sheets, she swallowed, but when she came up afterwards, she made sure to leave a tiny bit on her lip. He wiped it away carefully before kissing her.

"That was amazing," he said. "You've never done that before?"

"Nope." She smiled and laid her head on his chest. She reached down and tucked his cock back in his underwear. "Never." She looked at his fantasies and immediately knew something was wrong.

After orgasm, Sabriel had noticed, a man's fantasies recede. Sometimes they were replaced by hate and indignation—very common among men raised to believe that sex was sinful. Sometimes, the fantasies were replaced by a kind of calm, and Sabriel hated those men most of all, because the calm was the ocean at sunset, and no man should have any right to those feelings. Many men just went to sleep, and while it was insensitive, Sabriel didn't care.

But Nolan didn't have any of that. He didn't have sex on the brain, but the fantasies of innocence and virginity were still there. She had fulfilled an immediate need for him, but something deeper remained. She should have been worried, or possibly a little hurt. She was beginning to feel intrigued.

She rubbed his stomach and concentrated, reaching out with lust, with the energy and life of the seas. She didn't want to make him uncontrollably aroused, not yet. She just wanted to turn him on a little, to put that immediate need back. She was curious as to what he'd do.

At first, he did nothing. She could tell he was thinking of a way to broach the subject of sex without seeming like a total jerk. She was expecting him to offer to go down on her—that would be reasonable, "returning the favor" and all—but he didn't. Instead, he asked if Kirsten had ever been spanked.

This surprised Sabriel enough that she didn't need to feign shock. "No." She sat up to look him in the eye. "Not since I was a kid," she added.

Her surprise pleased him. She saw something change behind his eyes and knew that he felt he was approaching some goal. What, she couldn't imagine—unless, of course, he was looking to take her cherry. But that didn't seem likely for some reason; his need seemed more complex than that.

Nolan idly reached over and undid the back of her dress. "Not crazy about spanking, myself," he said. "It's loud and kind of uncouth, I think. But I'm not at all opposed to pain." He had a kind, almost gentle smile on his face as he said that. Sabriel started to feel uncomfortable because she was having trouble guessing his motives. "Lay down," he continued. Sabriel did so, but contented herself with the fact that if he tried anything remotely out of ordinary, she could kill him and disappear like an ocean wave.

He ran a hand down her skin, starting at the base of her neck, and sighed. She felt the gust of breath on her flesh and reminded herself again how much she hated this sort of thing. She had done this a million times before. He might move his hand down her dress and fondle her ass. He might kiss her. She didn't much care. The only reason she was still here, she thought, tensing her muscles involuntarily as his fingers slid through her hair, was because she was interested in what he wanted from her. She thought about "Kirsten's" young life and how it might have different from Christina's. When did Kirsten have her first kiss? Maybe thirteen or fourteen? Under bleachers or at summer camp? Sabriel heard a scratching sound behind her but ignored it. She moved her hips, enjoying the feel of the warm bed under them. She smiled into the pillow for a moment and forgot to stop.

When the first drop of hot wax met her skin, she was unprepared. She actually gasped, not because she liked the momentary burn and then the cool pleasure, but because she was surprised.

That surprise faded, and she clenched her teeth to keep from gasping as the next few drops fell on her back. She glanced up at him and saw him gazing at the spot where the wax fell, a small smirk on his face, the look of a man inches from conquest. She looked at the votive candle and remembered that Brenda had always insisted on candlelight for sex, always made some attempt to disguise it as love. *Poor Brenda*, she thought, and giggled at the thought of Brenda with hot wax dripping on her skin.

"Are you all right?"

Sabriel rolled over and looked up at Nolan. He'd blown out the candle and was looking at her strangely. He was growing suspicious. Sabriel could see it in his eyes. She should not have laughed. Her laugh was jaded and pained unless she bothered to call on Christina's memories first. He knew she wasn't so innocent now.

There was a kind of menace to him, now that he knew. They sat on the bed, facing each other, his shirt open, pants still undone, her dress falling, one breast showing, her hair mussed, the unlit candle in his hand. They stared at each other trying to decide what to do next.

His cell phone rang and jarred them both out of the reverie. He stood up and buttoned his pants, shot her an apologetic look and dug the phone out of his coat. "Hello?"

Nolan moved to the other end of the room to talk, but Sabriel wasn't listening. The feeling she'd felt before was back, an odd sense that another demon was near and yet unaware of her presence. She stood up and fastened her dress and then opened the door to the hallway. The feeling faded; perhaps the demon was in the next room? Near the walls, maybe, or hiding somewhere? Or maybe... Nolan?

She turned. The sensation did seem to emanate from Nolan, but not from his person—from the very air around him. Nolan grabbed the remote from atop the television and switched the news on.

The scene showed devastation. Police in riot gear, screaming citizens, fire and destruction. Sabriel watched, desperately trying to feel indifferent to the suffering. Christina's memories didn't help. She had never seen destruction on such a scale; Sabriel remembered wars that put the earthquake and riot scene she was watching to shame. On a television screen, it seemed almost trivial, not real. It was almost possible to convince herself that these were actors.

Until Lucifer appeared.

It was only a split second, but she knew what she saw. Nolan did not see. His back was to the screen for that endless moment. Sabriel remembered the war then. Not just the atrocity as she called up the seas against the heavenly host, not just the horror and blackness of the Abyss, but the reasons the whole thing began. She remembered, and that memory touched off a million others—what it was to be flesh and water and spirit and idea, what it meant to experience another being in totality, not just in the transfer of fluids that humans had come to call "making love." That moment all but washed away the pain she'd felt for unending years in Hell.

But that moment faded. The Lightbringer disappeared. The network cut to a commercial.

Sabriel was vaguely aware of Nolan saying, "Right, I'm on the next flight back." He began gathering his clothes and his videos, throwing them haphazardly into a bag. "You have to go," he said. "I mean, I do. To LA. Emergency."

Sabriel turned to him, slowly, numbly. The moment had faded. The moment had loved her, used her, fucked her and was gone. After the orgasm only time remained. She nodded, and then stood and walked towards the door.

"Do you need a ride someplace?"

She stopped to consider. She hadn't thought much beyond figuring Nolan out, so she didn't have a plan. She didn't need one, really, but if Nolan could tell her where to find the actress... the notion was an empty one. Sabriel didn't much care.

She turned to him and idly noticed that she could no longer sense the other demon. She listened against the hum of the lights and tried to figure out where the sensation had come from, but couldn't. She felt only a lingering sense of the infernal coming from somewhere around Nolan. She shook her head. "What's your game?"

Nolan shook his head. "What?"

Sabriel sighed. She felt tired. She had no more time for this man. The tide was low, the seas calm and unpleasant. "Nolan, what's going on? What do you really want?"

"Look, Kirsten—"

"Don't call me that." The seas began to change. Storm clouds rolled in. "If you don't tell me I'm just going to look."

Nolan tried to protest again, but Sabriel didn't give him the chance. She stepped forward and placed a hand on his chest and *knew* him. One of the few ideas the modern Bible had right, she'd often thought, was the translation of sex as *knowing* someone. She had already had him sexually, at least in a way. Now she needed the rest.

She saw his fantasies, from the very beginning. Saw his desires to write and tell stories, to see them played out on the screen by beautiful people. Saw the people who had made him cry. She saw the first girl he'd deflowered and the power it gave him, her crying gently against his chest as her virginal blood dried on his cock. Saw him at college, saw him in LA, saw him making a promise to a demon.

The pitcher of water near Nolan began to shake. Sabriel was growing angry.

Enshagkushanna was the demon's name. Sabriel vaguely remembered it. She remembered being cast into Hell along with him. She remembered the clamor when he had vanished, word of mouth passed along by a thousand thousand of Lucifer's faithful soldiers, that Enshagkushanna had escaped... or been freed.

The pitcher of water overflowed. The smell of salt water filled the air.

Tears streamed down Nolan's face as he relived his life, his damnation, in a matter of seconds. Sabriel had almost forgotten him. She was thinking about Lucifer again. Had he truly freed Enshagkushanna? Could he have freed her?

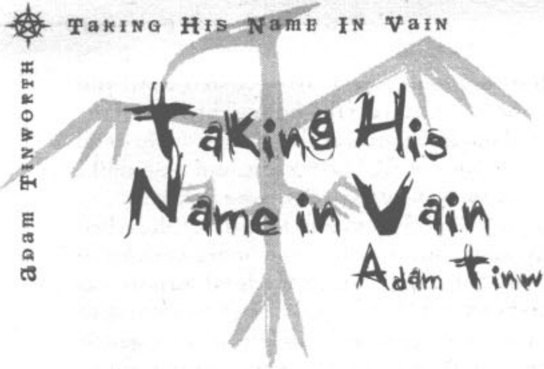
Did he leave her in Hell for a billion black eternities?

The pitcher of water exploded. Nolan cried out in pain as the glass lodged in his leg. Sabriel's flowing, oceanic locks touched the ceiling, leaving tiny wet spots. "Do you realize who you serve?" She needn't have asked. Few servants knew. Nolan shook his head but couldn't form words. "How many girls, Nolan? How many lowrent porn actresses were virgins like Kirsten until you met them?" She lifted him off the floor. The roar of the ocean drowned out his scream as she threw him through the window. Sabriel took flight after him and flowed like an ocean breeze into an empty room one floor up.

Sabriel sat in the hotel room for a long time. She called a cab company and then an airline, and booked a ticket to Los Angeles—or San Diego, since the local airport was closed. Then she waited. She sat and thought, listening to the commotion downstairs as a backdrop, as a gentle ocean, trying to sort out her thoughts. Sabriel wasn't thinking about Nolan or his master, even as dangerous as Enshagkushanna might be. She was thinking about Lucifer. She was thinking about what she might say to him. She was wondering if he would remember her.

If he would still love her. If he still loved the humans.

Not that she cared about' *them*, she reminded herself.



Taking His Name in Vain

Adam Tinworth

To be fair, it wasn't the way Magdiel of the House of the Final Night expected to see him again. Lucifer, the leader of a third of the host of heaven, the first rebel and the greatest Elohim of the House of the Morningstar, was on television. As the petite Asian woman—with long dark hair, striking features which hinted at Pakistani or Indian ancestry, and the soul of a demon—sat in shock, she couldn't help but contrast the sight with her last, hazy memory of him. It was a glimpse of his righteous fury in the last battle of the thousand-year war, when he seemed all-powerful even as defeat became inevitable. That was the image of him Magdiel had clung to in the untold ages she spent in the Abyss. Now he was in Los Angeles, being filmed and broadcast around the world, while she sat drinking coffee in a small, grimy café in the East End of London.

Magdiel was vaguely aware that *Steve's Café* was a dump. The food was greasy, the hygiene perfunctory at best and the café owner himself was at once lecherous and utterly disinterested in customer service. The tables were wiped over very occasionally, but the seats seemed to be maintaining a living record of all the people who had ever sat on them. The battered old television in the corner looked as if it had been there for decades. It was rarely ever watched unless there was a sports match showing.

So why did Magdiel keep coming here? She knew the answer to that perfectly well. She was following old habits from her body's former life. It was one of Anila's favorite haunts, a place to escape the pressures of her job as a social worker for an hour or so. There was nowhere else near their office in Hackney that was open in the daytime, so all the social services staff tended to drop in there from time to time. If Magdiel was to continue posing as Anila, she had to keep to the same habits.

Besides that, she enjoyed it. There was so much to see and always something to distract her. It reflected the multiethnic East End at its best and, occasionally, its worst. Today, she really needed something to distract her. She'd argued with her, no, with *Anila's* husband again last night. She understood that Tony was lashing out verbally because he was confused. He could sense something was wrong with her and he didn't like it. But what could she say? "I'm sorry, darling, you're right. There is something wrong. I'm not actually your wife at all, but a demon from Hell, living in her body and pretending to be her."

At best, Tony'd be insulted that she'd tried such a blatant lie. At worst he'd have her institutionalized. Magdiel sighed to herself. She relished exploring the relationship Anila had had with her husband. She enjoyed the love he showed her, the same adoration she'd always wanted from humanity. Was it really worth the problems, though? Could she go on pretending to be this woman for much longer?

For now, she avoided the problem by staring at the patterns the raindrops made on the grimy glass of the café window while she waited for her coffee to cool. She would follow each rivulet of water with rapt attention as it joined others and created random but deeply beautiful patterns on the glass. She lost a good ten minutes to that, peeling back the layers of reality to see the underlying structure of the rivulets' passage, seeking to understand why it appealed to her so. In the end, she stopped only because she realized her coffee was getting cold.

Despite her workmates' branding of the coffee as "that filthy muck that Steve serves," Magdiel found it an endless source of pleasure. After each sip she would pause a while and savor the rich, bitter flavor burning its way into her taste buds and the buzz the caffeine created in her borrowed body. Perhaps it was their rather shallow perception of the world that prevented them from really enjoying it, she mused. To Magdiel, it was the purest pleasure, tainted only by the lack of a word in Anila's vocabulary to really describe the taste. Still, after the interminable imprisonment in the empty void of the Abyss, each and every sensation in this world was to be captured, relished and enjoyed. Magdiel tried her best to do just that. That meant, as she had decided weeks ago, spending at least an hour in Steve's café each day.

So it was that, on that rainy day, she sat—alternately staring at the café window in rapt attention and savoring her coffee—as the Devil made himself known to the world. The gasps of amazement from her fellow patrons broke her reverie. The other customers were a surly, uncommunicative lot. This degree of expression was obviously unusual, even to Magdiel's rather rusty human social barometer.

Magdiel turned round to see what all the fuss was about and realized that everyone was staring at the television, meals left to congeal in their own grease. The picture on the screen was blurred and indistinct, and she could hear screams and the urgent tone of a reporter trying to describe what was happening. She caught a few words: "Los Angeles," "riots," "creature," "wings." And then, she saw him. Lucifer. The Morningstar.

Magdiel felt a surge of hope and fear twisting together inside her. She moved closer to the television, straining to see better. Could it really be him, after all this time? The picture was patchy and broken, true, but what it showed was unmistakable: that terrible, beautiful visage; the piercing purity of his voice, resonant and cutting even through the TV's tinny speakers; Lucifer. She couldn't quite make out what was going on around him. There seemed to be fighting in the streets, buildings burning and other signs of urban chaos. All of it seemed insignificant against the sight of him rising into the air, his full glory revealed to the world.

Magdiel could feel the fear in the people around her. Everything they took for granted was being stripped away from them as they watched that screen. None of them doubted for a second that they were witnessing something beyond anything they'd seen before. The sight of something beyond nature was undermining their world of rationality, consumer goods and credit card debt. Her short time out of the Abyss had taught her that precious few people had any real faith left. Religion was consigned to history by many people, treated as some primitive superstition to be risen above.

Now, however, these people were being presented with evidence of the reality of the supernatural, and they were afraid. The assumptions that they'd based their lives on were gone, and they had no clue how to act. Magdiel didn't care. They were only people, squandering their lives in dead-end jobs in the arse end of London. All that mattered was that Lucifer, the angel that had led the rebels in open defiance of God himself, was free and here on Earth. The answer to all the questions she had about her imprisonment and escape were within her reach. All she had to do was get to this Los Angeles place and track Lucifer down.

Suddenly she heard somebody laughing and laughing loudly. After a moment's thought, she realized it was her. With joy truly in her heart for the first time since her return to this world, Magdiel made her way back to the office. She had to find a way of getting to Los Angeles as quickly as she could.

* * *

Magdiel was close to punching the laptop in her frustration. She'd been on the bloody device for hours now, both in the office and now at home, trying to arrange a flight to Los Angeles, and she was getting nowhere. While Anila had been reasonably familiar with the computer and this Internet thing, Magdiel struggled to get a grip on it. The Elohim had worked bloody hard to create this world. What were the humans doing trying to create another one inside these stupid little boxes?

Tony, a little bemused by the strength of her desire to get there, gently extracted the laptop from her clenched hands and went to work. As Magdiel seethed, this human succeeded where she had failed. All the airports around the city, and in something called the "Bay Area" were closed until further notice.

"And are you in the slightest bit surprised?" asked Tony.

"Why should I be?" asked Magdiel, genuinely puzzled.

"Well, isn't it obvious, 'Nila? First of all, how many airlines want to fly into a city with that sort of chaos going on? Riots and earthquakes aren't good for business, you know. And more to the point, they'll have every religious loony on the planet trying to get there after the show earlier."

Magdiel looked at him for a moment, trying to fathom what he was getting at. Then it struck her. "You think I'm one of them? A loony?"

"Well, it does seem kinda odd that you've being doing nothing since you got home apart from trying to arrange flights there. I thought you Hindus didn't believe in angels," said Tony, as he sat down next to his wife and drew her to him.

"I'm not Hindu," said Magdiel automatically, parroting Anila's accustomed response to her husband's teasing as she eased into his arms. The warmth of him around her felt so good. "What did you make of what you saw this afternoon?'

Tony looked down for a moment, his eyes full of love and confusion. Then his long hair flopped briefly over them in that way she found so appealing. He seemed to be considering his response carefully and Magdiel briefly hoped that this moment of quiet intimacy would last forever.

"I've never been religious, as you know. Sure, Mum and Dad sent me to Sunday school and all that shit, but I never really believed in it. I mean, nobody does these days, do they?

"You're avoiding the question, my love. What did you think of what we saw on the television?"

She knew the answer before he spoke. She could feel it stirring inside him, the newly born faith in something.

"I dunno. I'd love to believe that it was something. It *felt* like something, but..."

The silence hung between them for a few minutes. Magdiel had no intention of breaking it. She wanted to hear what he had to say. He held her close for a little while, as if uncertain and seeking reassurance. Magdiel hesitated and then reached up and kissed him. He pulled back and flashed an enormous smile at her.

"It's been too long since you kissed me like that."

"The angel..." prompted Magdiel, playing with the side of his neck.

"Oh, yeah. That. Well, I just wish it had happened in front of me. When I first saw it on the TV, it seemed so real, so immediate. Now, I look at the images on the Internet and the news and I wonder if I'm fooling myself. I guess I want to believe it's real, but I can't help feeling people will laugh at me if I say it."

Magdiel laughed. She just couldn't help herself.

"See, you're laughing at me," said Tony, pulling away abruptly. "I'm going to get dinner."

"No, wait," she gasped, getting control of herself and pulling him closer. "I only laughed because, well, I'm the last person who should be mocking you for holding beliefs like that. Really."

"What do you mean?" he asked, curious.

Magdiel was suddenly aware that she was on slippery ground. "Let's just say that I've had a pretty profound spiritual experience of my own recently."

"Care to share?"

Magdiel took a long look at Tony. He was young, cocky, but still looking for something to define his life. He'd spent so long making the relationship with Anila work against the opposition of both their parents that he was lost without something to struggle against now that they were married. She was tempted to lead him toward what she really was. Lucifer's appearance had opened his mind, at least for a while. In his current frame of mind, he could be seduced into believing in her very, very easily.

But no, that wasn't fair. She loved Tony. No, that wasn't right. She valued his love and adoration, freely given. Their moments of passion and intimacy, growing more frequent as she got better at being Anila, were so far removed from the torments of Hell and so close to the very worship that they'd rebelled to win that she just couldn't give it up. Somehow it was the freedom that made that worship possible, so she didn't want to take that freedom from him.

"Please don't be insulted, but it's not something I'm ready to share with you right now," she said, carefully, stroking his hair and staring straight into his eyes. "Some other time."

"Yeah," he said, uncertainly.

"Let's talk about something else," she said, drawing Tony to her and relishing every sweet sensation of the long, lingering kiss she gave him.

"Mmm," sighed Tony, as he pulled away for a moment. "My favorite kind of conversation."

* * *

The next morning Magdiel decided to make an early start for the office, leaving Tony sound asleep, exhausted yet happy. With the distractions of last night's pleasures gone, she was desperate to see if there were any flights available to Los Angeles. The underground journey seemed to be taking forever, and her eyes roved around the train seeking distraction. The headline of the paper the guy opposite her was reading caught her attention. *Three Dead in Satanic Killings* it screamed. Before she realized she was doing it, Magdiel was on her feet, grabbing the paper out of the guy's hands.

Ignoring his protests, as was everyone else on the train, she quickly scanned her way through the story. Three people had been killed last night in separate incidents, two blacks and one Asian. All three had been found with the words "Praise Lucifer" daubed in their own blood above them. Magdiel felt a chill run down her spine. How did they know it was Lucifer on the TV yesterday? It could be a lucky guess. More likely, though, it was the involvement of one of her kind, another demon. She'd encountered one so old and powerful in this city that she was not sure she even understand what it was anymore. The prospect of—

"I said, give me my paper back, you bitch." Magdiel looked up at the red-faced, chubby businessman glaring at her. For a brief moment, she contemplated showing him exactly what he was dealing with, and then just shoved the paper back at him instead. Glaring at her, he sat down once more and resumed reading.

Magdiel looked up and down the carriage. These people were all continuing as if nothing had happened. She could see pictures of Lucifer on the front pages of all the papers being read along the carriage, but as a minor story, alongside the killings and certainly not as important as stories about the larger chaos in Los Angeles.

Magdiel slid back into her seat. These people had seen Lucifer himself yesterday, but they continued with their lives as if nothing had happened. They should have been profoundly affected by what they saw, just as Tony was. Instead they just seemed indifferent. Had humanity really fallen this far? Were they utterly incapable of believing anything anymore? She glanced at the headline about the killings again. No, obviously some people were very affected by what happened yesterday. Why, though? What made them different? And why did they kill in Lucifer's name?

The more she thought about it, the more a quiet fury stole into her soul. She had spent most of her existence defending the name of Lucifer against those demons who claimed he had betrayed them. Even in the empty void of the Abyss, when all hope of escape seemed to have faded, she still argued against those who would call the Morningstar traitor. She would not tolerate mortals besmirching his name now. He, like all the fallen, had given up everything for humanity. When God had left the humans ignorant and afraid, the fallen had reached out with comfort and reassurance, and paid the price. If humanity, God's little favorites, hadn't the grace to be grateful, she'd make them sorry. After all, she had millennia of practice at making human souls suffer. She doubted the last few weeks would have dulled her edge that much.

When the train pulled into her stop, she was the first through the doors, pushing her way impatiently through the throngs of commuters waiting to board.

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As Magdiel read through the various reports in the papers and on the Internet, she built up a clearer picture of what happened. Whoever the killer was, he'd started in Mile End early in the evening, killing a black teenager in an alley not far from the tube station. Within an hour, he'd killed a young Asian guy in the subway near Bromley by Bow station. Two hours later, he'd trapped a black woman, a mother, in her home and killed her. Luckily her kids had been out with their father. A few of the accounts hinted at sexual assault, but there was no confirmation of that.

There was no obvious pattern in the killings that Magdiel could see at first glance. If it really was one of her kind behind it, there should be something in the choice of victims, but she just couldn't see it.

Her colleague Kenton had arrived half an hour ago and had been busy chatting with someone in the door of their office for all that time. He was always slow to get going in the morning. Eventually he wound up his conversation and wandered over to Magdiel.

"Morning, Anila," he said as he tried to peer over her shoulder at what she was doing. "Busy?"

She merely grunted in response, hoping he'd lose interest.

Kenton shook his head, grabbed one of her newspapers and headed off to the toilet. Once he'd gone, Magdiel looked up again. Kenton's morning read and bowel movement normally gave her a clear half hour. She desperately wanted to call her husband and talk things through with him again. She needed to hear him say he still believed in what he'd seen. It would help her calm down a little and make it easier for her to fight the rising hate within herself. Maybe then she could figure out what to do next.

Tony picked up the phone on the fifth ring.

"Morning, darling," said Magdiel, doing her best to sound sultry but suspecting that she was failing badly. "How's life in a world with angels?"

"Oh, that." He sounded embarrassed. "Well, I was just talking about it with some of the lads here in the office and we reckon it was all staged."

"What? *Staged*?"

"Yeah, you know how disasters always bring out hoaxers looking to make some cash or just play a stupid game. I mean, LA is full of people who work in the movies. If they couldn't stage something like this, I don' know who could."

Magdiel snorted in disbelief. "So, you've just dismissed everything we talked about out of hand? You've just forgotten about it?"

"Well, I was pretty shaken up yesterday," Tony said defensively. "It's not every day you see a city descend into chaos like that."

"But you can't believe what you saw yesterday was real?"

"Aw, c'mon 'Nila. Like I said, we were all shaken up, but an angel?"

Magdiel slammed the phone down in disgust.

"Hubby problems?" said Kenton from behind her. She hadn't heard him return. "That hoax is a pretty stupid thing for the two of you to argue over after everything you've been through."

Magdiel waved at the copy of *The Times* he was still holding. "Somebody obviously thought it was real."

"Firstly, they're killing for the Devil, not an angel. Secondly, all the victims were from ethnic minorities," said Kenton. "That sounds more like racism than Satanism to me."

Magdiel paused. That hadn't occurred to her. This obsession with skin color was still alien to her, despite Anila's experiences of racism. Sure, she remembered what racial abuse was like, but that didn't mean she truly understood it. Anyway, she'd been so focused on the Lucifer aspect of the killings, it had never occurred to her to look for other motives.

"I hadn't thought about it," she said, honestly.

Kenton looked surprised. "That's not like you. Anyway, I'm sure one of these lads was one of our cases eighteen months ago. He got into a few fights, and we were asked to monitor the family for a while."

Magdiel nodded curtly. "I pulled the file before you got here and got an address for his parents."

"Why?"

Because I want to find his ghost, if he's left one, and ask him some questions, thought Magdiel. Of course, she couldn't tell Kenton that. "The police called, asking if we had anything useful. I told them as much as I could without breaching client confidentiality. I suspect we'll be called in to give some support to the family."

"Mmmm. You might be right." Kenton sighed heavily. "Just what we bloody need. Ah, well, I'm gonna grab a coffee from Steve's and warn the boss. Want anything?"

Magdiel shook her head.

* * *

Her first visit was a waste of time. Neither the murder site of the Asian man nor the home of the grieving parents betrayed any sign of a lingering spirit. She went through the routine of offering the parents help and counseling as best she could, dredging each step out of Anila's memories. As she left the flat, she sincerely hoped that she wouldn't have to go through that again. The suffering those people were going through reminded her too much of the torment she'd inflicted on the souls of the dead while she was still in Hell.

Based on the map she had brought with her, Magdiel reckoned that a nearby small park was almost exactly halfway between the alley where Ahmadu, the black kid, had died and his home, the two most likely places to find his spirit. Perhaps that would be a better place to try. If nothing else, she could put off confronting any grieving relatives for a little longer.

The small park proved to be something of a shambles. She looked around, despairing of the damage done to the Elohim's creation. She was surrounded by some old and unkempt grass, hundreds of pigeons and the remains of a tramp's bed. This would have to do. Magdiel sat down on one of the park benches, checked that she had the victim's name right and then closed her eyes. She concentrated and let her focus on Anila's senses drift away. Slowly, she allowed her perceptions as one of the Elohim to return, seeing the levels of reality and the patterns that underlay them once more. Then she uttered a string of syllables that any human nearby would have been hard pressed to hear, let alone understand.

She felt reality responding to her touch as she applied the right pressure at the right point. It was lucky that humans made no attempt to conceal their laughably simple names. It made this process much easier.'ł*There*. She could feel him lingering in the alley where his body had been found. She uttered another stream of syllables and felt his soul pulled toward her. Confident that all was working properly, she opened her eyes and stood up.

Looking around her to make sure that no one was watching, Magdiel uttered another incomprehensible phrase and stepped into the spirit realm. The second she stepped through, she found herself buffeted by a wind so strong that she struggled to keep her balance. Bracing herself against the storm, she looked around the gray, dreary landscape.

While the wind was strong, there were no signs of the storms of blood, bone and souls that sometimes swept through here. She was safe for a little while.

The view was a grim one. There were no leaves on the trees and the ground was bereft of grass. The park bench she had been sitting on looked half-rotted as if it were about to collapse at any second. Despite that, a teenage black boy sat on it, a look of utter desolation on his face. There was no doubt it was the right boy. The face was the same as the one in the photos that morning. The gaping wounds in his ghostly body corresponded exactly to those reported in the paper.

"Help me, lady," he said, looking up at her with wide, desperate eyes. "I've been hurt bad. I need to go to a hospital."

Magdiel went and sat next to him. "I'm afraid it's not that simple," she said.

He turned to look at her. "Why the hell not?"

"Look at yourself, Ahmadu. Look at yourself carefully."

Tears welled up in the boy's eyes. "No. I don't want to."

"Look," commanded Magdiel, calling on the power with which she'd summoned him.

He stared down at his chest and started sobbing gently to himself, as his hands gingerly explored his exposed chest cavity. "Aw, fuck, man. Aw, fuck. They cut me."

"You're dead. You died last night. Stop denying it to yourself. You're no use to me if you deny it."

He looked up at her, eyes misted with spectral tears. an"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to know who killed you."

Ahmadu looked up at her again, anger briefly flashing in his eyes. "Oh. I know the bastard all right. His name's Gareth. Gareth Brown. I screwed a girl he liked a few months back, and he's had it in for me ever since. Didn't like a brother screwing that cute white bitch. Said that I didn't know my place." The last phrase was full of a short lifetime's accumulated hate. "He and two of his mates found me in town last night..."

Magdiel let him talk, drinking in all the information she could about the killers. From what the boy was saying, they sounded like normal mortals, not that that meant much. No one knew that she was anything other than human. She hadn't left anyone who'd seen her true form alive.

When she was satisfied she'd got everything she could from the boy, she told him he was free to go.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

"Honestly? I have no idea," she said. "I wish I had a better answer for you, but I don't. I can free you from what binds you to this place, if you wish, but I have no idea what happens to you then."

"I dunno. What if there's nothing after?" he said, fearfully.

For a moment, she wanted to reach out and comfort the boy, like she remembered Tony doing to Anila after those terrible arguments with her father over marrying a white man. Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to do it. She was an angel of death and yet she had no answers for the boy, nothing to really comfort him with. She turned away from him, guiltily.

"I don't know."

* * *

Brown wasn't hard to find. He was hard at work in the garage under the railway arches in Stratford, as Ahmadu had predicted. Magdiel opened the door to the workshop without knocking and closed it behind her. No point in making this obvious.

"Hello?" she called.

"'Ello, darlin'," said Gareth, emerging from underneath a car bonnet. "What can I do you for?"

He was in his midtwenties, stocky with the start of a potbelly. One of his ears was pierced and his hair was clipped short. He looked like the sort of guy who'd leer at her and then overcharge her by around 200% if she was stupid enough to bring a car here.

"I'd like to talk to you about Ahmadu," she said, walking slowly toward him. "I think you know something about his death."

"You police?" he asked, full of bravado.

"No," she said. "I'm something far worse than them."

As she walked, she let her true, demonic self start to warp her body. With each step she took, her legs grew longer and thinner and her form more androgynous. Razor sharp wings sprouted from her back as her face became smooth but for two intense burning eyes and a slit of a mouth. Her fingers elongated and came to razor-sharp points. She reached out, grasped the front of Gareth's overalls and lifted the terrified man up in the air.

"I am an angel of death," she whispered into his ear, her sharp tongue flicking in and out of her mouth. "And I want to know why you would kill in my Lord Lucifer's name."

For a moment, she thought she'd overdone it. Gareth was incoherent with fear. "Answer me," she whispered, "or you'll find out how it really feels to die for Lucifer."

She could feel him shudder at the thought. Then the words spilled out of him, tripping over themselves in their rush to escape him.

"I dunno, I dunno, it just seemed to be the right thing to do. Me and the lads, we just wanted to put some of those black bastards in their place. It's our country, that's all. We wanted it back. So we killed them, cleaned the country for his arrival. Dave said it was the right thing to do."

"Why Lucifer?" she hissed again, casually slashing deep into his leg with her other hand.

Gareth cried out in pain. "Oh, God, oh, God."

"I see," she said. "Last night you called out to the Devil, and he has sent me. Now, you call to God, but it's too late. You're not God's creature anymore, you're mine. Now, answer my question." She waited a beat. "No? Can't speak?" She dropped him and took a few steps back. "Then I'll just have to kill you and tear the answers out of your soul. Death is no escape for you."

Gareth tried to pull himself up to his knees, but slipped on his own blood and fell back to the floor. "Leave me alone, just leave me alone," he gasped out.

"No," she replied, driving her wing into his shoulder and lifting him into the air. He dangled there helplessly.

"Please," he begged. "Please, I just wanted to serve him. We were in the pub. We were drinking, when we saw him on the telly. We knew it was him, it was Lucifer. Dave said he was coming, and we wanted to serve him. We just wanted to make the earth clean of black scum for him."

"Who else was with you?"

"Dave... Dave and Bazza."

She lowered him back to the floor. "Good. Lucifer will be pleased with you. Now, tell me their addresses."

It took him nearly ten minutes to give her the address, and she had to stop him passing out more than once.

Once he was finished, she let herself return to her mortal form. His eyes went wide.

"You're... you're a Pak..."

"Yes, that's right, I'm a Pakistani, or at least my father was. Ironic, isn't it? You actually do manage to summon up a demon and she turns out to be colored. Bad luck. Still, things won't get any worse, now will they?"

"N... n... no...?" he stuttered.

"No, because you're about to die. For blaspheming the name of Lucifer, I take your life."

With that, she stepped forward and brought her hand down over his chest and stomach in a rapid slicing motion. Gareth screamed and instinctively reached for his belly. His hands were met by the moist wetness of his guts as they pitched out of the gaping wound in his torso. He stared at them for a few moments, his eyes wide with disbelief, and then he pitched forward onto his face and lay still.

Magdiel didn't wait to see what happened to his soul. Frankly, she didn't care. Now he could suffer the same fear and confusion that poor boy went through.

◆ ◆ ◆

Bazza turned out to be a fat guy with a stained T-shirt and an interesting selection of tattoos. He swore profusely as he flicked repeatedly at his light switch by the front door. The lights in the flat stubbornly refused to go on.

Still swearing up a storm, he made his way into the living room, groping around for the telephone. It was only when his hand fastened on something smooth, bitterly cold and arm-shaped that he noticed the eyes of fire staring at him.

Even as he was yelling in surprise a blow to the face sent him staggering backward into the sofa, which collapsed under his weight. As he put his hands to push himself upright, he realized that the material was mildewed and the wood rotten. Panic overcame him, then, and he tried to flee. He felt the lightest touch on his leg. Then it snapped under him and he fell to the ground, sobbing in pain.

"Is this what you wanted when you called to Lucifer last night?" whispered an unearthly voice in his ear.

"No... no... no..." he sobbed. "Shit, shit."

"Lucifer's rather busy but he sent me to see you instead. Do you know who I am?"

"Devil... you're the Devil."

"No, I'm an angel of death, and I've come for you."

His only response was a wracking sob.

"If you tell me what I want to know, your death will be swift and painless. If you deny me that, I'll torture your soul until the end of the world. Are we clear?"

Magdiel took the inarticulate sob as a yes.

◆ ◆ ◆

Dave was rather more interesting. For a start, he lived in an area of Bethnal Green that clearly attracted a wealthy crowd. The block of flats commanded an excellent view across Roman Road and Victoria Park.

She decided to approach him as Anila initially. The problems she'd had getting useful information out of Bazza before she killed him suggested that this might be a more profitable approach. Abject terror made talking to humans so hard. When he opened the door to her, he turned out to be a tall, well-built man in his thirties. He was wearing a smart shirt and had a neatly clipped beard.

"Can I help you?" he asked, looking slightly surprised.

"I want to talk to you about what happened last night."

"What do you mean?" he asked, sounding defensive.

"I've already spoken to Gareth and Bazza."

"Ah, well then. I think you'd better come in."

He ushered her through into a sizable room, furnished in a distinctly minimalist style. He had a three-piece black leather suit arranged in the center of the room, a flat-screen television against one wall, and a bookcase groaning under the weight of dozens of elderly hardback books and little else.

"Welcome to my humble abode," he said. "Now, you're not going to disappoint me by saying you're a journalist or policewoman or something, are you?"

"No, I'm not," replied Magdiel, a touch of amusement in her voice.

"I see. Who are you then?"

"You called. I came."

He looked out of the window for a moment. Magdiel, relishing his evident discomfort, took a seat and waited. She had plenty of time, and he had no chance of escaping. Even suicide couldn't save him from her.

"Do you think it says something about the world that I was able to motivate people to kill so easily?"

Magdiel just laughed.

"They were so eager to find any excuse for their beliefs, you know. They were unhappy with their lot in life and needed someone to blame. Someone who wasn't one of them. A different skin color is enough, but I'm sure you know that. Some people use religion as an excuse to kill, and some people use skin color. Mix the two together, and you have a powerful combination."

He turned to face her, the fear in his eyes betraying the confidant stance of his body. "Did I do well, my lady?"

Magdiel waved her hand in a noncommittal manner. "Tell me David, what's in this for you? This is a nice apartment. You're clearly a wealthy man. Why dirty your hands with this?"

Dave looked at her, puzzled. "For your greater glory, of course."

"Nonsense. Don't lie to me. No mortal does anything just for the greater glory of one of us."

As she spoke, Magdiel let her demonic form steal over her once more. Dave initially recoiled in horror at the transformation and then his expression changed to something like rapture. A strange, strangled sound escaped from his throat and slowly became laughter. Tears were streaming down his face as he slumped to his knees.

Magdiel stood and looked down at him. This was not the response she was expecting. "I told you to speak, little man. Tell me why you killed last night. Tell me what you hoped to gain."

Dave was gazing up at her with a mix of terror and adoration. The power of his belief tore through her and made every part of her spirit come alive, much as making love with Anila's husband last night had made her borrowed body feel more vital. She felt herself expand as the power of his belief allowed her true self to grow, until the full might of her demonic self towered over him.

Dave abased himself further and started speaking. "I... I did it for the power at first. I had money but I needed something else. Something that made me feel powerful and strong, something that showed me that I had the power of life and death over others.

"I needed people to work with. I didn't take me long to realize that people just wanted an excuse to act on their hatred. You see it every night on the news: religious violence. The problem was, Christianity wasn't any use anymore. All it motivates people to do is become happy, clappy idiots. Then I hit on it. Find the bigoted and insecure and persuade them that they could get power through killing."

Magdiel wondered why he'd stopped, and then realized with a start that he was waiting for some form of affirmation from her. "A clever thought. Go on, please, David."

"We did a few beatings, killed a guy, but it still wasn't working for me. I still had this hole inside I was trying to fill. And then I saw him, yesterday, on the telly. I suddenly realized, deep in my soul, that I was right. I had chosen the winning side. And now... you. Oh, my lady, I look at you in your glory and know that my life is fulfilled."

The part of Magdiel that played at being Anila wanted to laugh. The man was pathetic, desperately looking for something to give his empty life meaning. He'd killed for pleasure and to make himself feel better, yet he didn't even have the sense to be terrified when a demon stood before him. But she hadn't been worshiped like this since before the Fall, and she could feel the power of his belief surging through her. Her every sense throbbed as if electricity was running through her body, turning every move and every gesture into a small piece of ecstasy. She burned with the power of belief for the first time in millennia and she never wanted it to stop.

"Are you ready to serve me David?"

He nodded, his eagerness almost overwhelming.

"Then fetch me a knife, and some candles."

He did as he was told, fetching a sharp knife from the kitchen and a couple of church candles from the bedroom.

"Good," she said, taking the knife. "Now light the candles, strip off your shirt and kneel between them."

Once more he complied, a slight shiver betraying the mixed fear and excitement he was feeling. Once he was in position, Magdiel moved behind him.

"Do you fear death, David?"

"No," he said.

She laughed. It was a dry, chilling sound and it made David shiver.

"Put your arms into the flames, David."

"Lord?"

"Lady! And do as I say."

Reluctantly, he stretched his arms out and let them hover above the candle flames. The smell of burning hair filled the room, followed by a hint of cooking flesh. David gritted his teeth and tears slowly trickled from eyes that were firmly squeezed shut.

Magdiel stayed silent, and after a few minutes David suddenly yelled out in pain and pulled his arms out of the candle flame. She thrust the knife against his throat so fast that he barely had time to register what had happened. He gasped and then held his breath to stop his neck pressing against the edge of the knife. Then he felt the pressure of her razor-sharp talons against his back.

"Do you fear death now?" she whispered.

"Yes, yes, I do," he replied, moving as little as he possibly could.

"Do you understand that death is not to be given lightly, only when it is needed? That it is a sacred task, not a petty pleasure?"

"Yes."

"Then," she said, while removing the knife and stepping away. "You may serve me. Turn to face me."

As he turned, Magdiel surged forward and grasped his face between her hands. He felt his body fill with something greater than himself, something that made him feel small and insignificant for a moment. Then, as it withdrew, it left him feeling stronger, more confident, more in control than he ever had before.

"What have you done?"

"Given you the control over other people that you desire."

"I see." He struggled for words for a moment. "Thank you."

The ritual completed, both sat quietly, relishing the bond that Magdiel had forged between them. Suddenly, Magdiel's eyes snapped open. "Oh no," she whispered.

David sprang to his feet. "My lady, what's wrong? Have I offended you?"

She shook her head. "No. Somebody spoke my name, called to me. They said I have proved myself ready, and I should go to them."

"My lady?"

"I have to go. Await my return."

Magdiel felt the high from Dave's worship die away as she walked out of the flat. It didn't have the lingering strength of Tony's love, it was just a fix that passed too quickly. Suddenly, she was afraid. She might never see Tony again. She'd faced the other demon in London (or its thralls, at least) only once before, and she'd just barely escaped then. She might not be so lucky this time.

* * *

Magdiel stood in a deserted part of Victoria Park, waiting. She knew it was aware of where she was. If it wanted her, it could come to her. Even so, she was vaguely surprised when three people arrived, all coming from different directions. She could feel its presence inside them. Still, she stood and waited. There was no point in running. It had found her twice now. She was sure it could do it again.

Instead, Magdiel took a careful look at the approaching trio. Each of them had the distinctive air of distraction that she'd seen in the demon's puppets in the past. One was a small boy, probably not even in his teens yet. Straight ahead of her was a woman in her thirties, dressed in a smart suit, heels and jacket with the kind of taught, stretched body and features that spoke of too much time in the gym and not enough exercise in the rest of her life. To her right was a gangly young man, slightly acne scarred, with sandy blond hair, dressed in a brown jumper and jeans. She wasn't quite surrounded, but they were close enough to make an immediate exit difficult.

As one, the three of them spoke. "Magdiel."

"What do you want from me this time?" she asked. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I want you to serve me. I can protect you from those things in Hell that still demand your service," said the woman. "You know that. I thought you might be a little more amenable to my offer, now you've seen what Lucifer's little ploy caused."

"I thought cults were more your style than Lucifer's," she replied, watching the three warily.

"Oh, that had nothing to do with me, much as I wish it had," said the boy, shaking his head. "Human are quite capable of killing each other without my intervention. Lucifer just gave them an excuse."

"How the hell did they know it was him?"

"Oh, well, I might have given them a little push in that direction," said the gangly youth, looking up at her for the first time since he had arrived. "They would have done it anyway, once they saw the angel, but I wanted to make sure that it got your attention. Consider it a free lesson in the needs of humanity."

"Their needs?"

"Don't play games with me, Magdiel of the House of the Final Night. I know what you've seen and done today. You've seen that they have a need inside them for belief, for something to worship.

"So you say. Yet, this morning, less than a day after Lucifer showed himself, they're dismissing it."

"Yes, a hoax. An hallucination...."

"A special effect."

The three fell silent for a moment. Then the child spoke. "Yes. A special effect. They're well trained to disregard anything that hints at a world beyond this one."

As one, the three sat down. The woman gestured for Magdiel to do the same. Magdiel ignored her.

"Trained by whom? Who has that power? God?" A touch of anger crept into Magdiel's voice. "He created them to worship him, and he kept that little privilege to himself. What reason would he have to do deny himself that?"

"He didn't," said the gangly youth. "Lucifer did."

Magdiel laughed uneasily. "You're lying. Lucifer gave up everything so we could all be worshipped by humanity. Why would he destroy that hope?"

The three stood again and moved into a line.

"Look at them," said the woman. "I'm not forcing them to do anything. They came to me. They gave themselves to me because I gave them something to believe in, a purpose to life. People to worship, people to hate. You've seen it. You saw people wanting to believe in Lucifer when they saw him. You saw that man when you revealed yourself to him, how happy he became."

Magdiel thought of the rapture on David's face as she showed her true form to him. She thought of the pleasure that consumed her as she finally received the worship for which she had turned against God to obtain. She looked at the three puppets in front of her. Was that look in their eyes ecstasy? Were they really willing participants in this? Is this what David would become?

"Lucifer's gone mad, Magdiel. He was banished from God's presence, shunned by the angels and barred from us. Humanity learned that he was evil at God's feet. He's known by a thousand names across the world and every one of them means suffering, hate and pain."

The images from Los Angeles flashed through Magdiel's mind: the earthquake, the suffering, the riots and the dying. Lucifer's work?

"Yes, Magdiel, it was his work. Why else do you think he appeared there? His existence is devoted to revenge: on God for rejecting him, on humanity for hating him and on us for failing him. He's spent millennia doing everything he can to turn humanity from us, while making their lives miserable. Because of him, God has abandoned the world, just as the world has abandoned him. We're all that's left. Join me, Magdiel. Help me give humanity the belief they need once more. Help me make humanity worship us. Wasn't that what we fought and suffered for?"

Magdiel turned her back on the chorus of rapture the three puppets had become. She couldn't think clearly. It seemed like everything she wanted, and answer to an eternity of longing. Yet something seemed wrong. David's worship had felt right, but it had passed so quickly. It didn't make her feel really loved and adored, the way Tony did. It was selfish, not selfless.

"What if I refuse?" she asked, trying to buy herself time to think.

"You know the answer to that already."

Magdiel felt a sudden chill. She turned round to find that the three had moved closer to her. "Yes, I know," she snapped. "You'll destroy this body and send me back to Hell. You'll destroy me like you did the others."

"No. I won't," said the woman. "I don't need to do that. The rest of them were a threat to me. You? You're just a Slayer, a member of the last and least of the houses. You know that's true, and you're afraid of it. You're afraid of me, of what Lucifer's return might mean and most of all, of what you really are. Look at you, still trying to hide behind the life of that girl. It's a pathetic charade, and you know that deep inside."

Magdiel stepped backward, as if trying to escape the words. "It's not true," she whispered, almost inaudibly. "I like living this life. I love my husband."

"You don't love that insignificant animal. He doesn't really love you. He loves the woman whose pathetic soul you beat down and whose body you usurped. It would be better to allow him to mourn his wife now that you've in effect killed her. Of course, you don't understand that, do you? You can bring death to people, but you have no real understanding of it. You can't even comfort a ghost and give it final rest."

The voice switched, now coming from the small kid to her left. "It's our most powerful tool, Magdiel. People are so afraid of death that they will believe anything if it frees them from that fear. You free them from that fear, and you give them power. You end the pain that's haunted them since God revoked their immortality."

The woman continued the tirade. "Give it up, Magdiel. Give up that life. Give up this charade of humanity. Remember who and what you truly are. You are a demon, the child of Hell. You were made to rule and to kill. You've started down that path. Now it's time to become my angel of death. Together we'll give them the hope Lucifer took from them."

"Enough! Stop blaspheming his name!" screamed Magdiel, and let her anger loose. That part of her that was Anila was swept aside, happy to see the voices that mocked her husband silenced, and Magdiel the Slayer screamed her fury and pain at the world. Her eyes blazed fire, her claws shot out and her wings unfurled. She rose into the air, howling.

The three hosts for the demon took an involuntary step backward, their sudden fear overcoming the control of the ancient creature. The boy turned to run, but he wasn't fast enough. Magdiel swept down on him, tearing his head from his body in one clean motion. The headless corpse toppled to the ground, blood leaking from the shattered remains of the neck.

Magdiel, lost in hatred and pain, turned on the other man, fire trailing from her eyes. He stood there, unmoving as she tore into him with her claws, three rapid blows reducing his body to bloody chunks.

The woman watched, still and calm as her companions were killed. When Magdiel turned on her, she started walking toward the Slayer, arms open. "Bring me death, Slayer," she whispered. "I give my life so you may know what you truly are."

Magdiel started toward her and then stopped. She looked at the woman in front of her, now on her knees and holding her arms toward Magdiel in an imploring gesture.

"Why?" asked Magdiel. "Why do you want to die?"

The woman looked momentarily confused and then took on the glazed expression of control. "Because he wills it. He will look after my soul."

Magdiel looked down at her sadly. Whoever or whatever this demon was, it didn't understand what death meant to the demons of the House of the Final Night. "I rebelled to save people like you from the pain of death, to explain to you why things had to perish. I never wanted this. I never wanted people to beg for my touch." The fire in her eyes took on a bluish, mournful hue.

"I decline your offer of service," Magdiel continued. "There are people I care about in this world and I don't want them to become pathetic addicts like this woman. Maybe we do need to bring belief back to humanity, but not like this. This isn't the true love of humanity that we sought, this is just the love of the power we can bring them. Destroy me if you wish. I won't be party to this."

Then Magdiel stroked the side of the woman's head, as tenderly as she touched her husband. "I'm sorry, but you really are better off dead."

A single blow was all it took.

* * *

Magdiel, as Anila once more, knocked on the door and waited. After a few moments, it opened and Dave looked at her with joy. "My lady! Come in, come in."

She let herself be ushered back into the flat, shrugging off his expressions of concern, and wandered over to the big window with its view over Roman Road below. She watched the people scurrying below and thought about how small they were, about how easily their personal needs and desires lead them to do self-destructive things. She thought about how easy it was to take advantage of that.

"Come to me, David. Come and kneel, here."

"Of course," he said, and rushed to obey.

"You want to serve me so badly, don't you?" she asked, unable to keep the sadness from her voice.

He looked up at her, puzzled. "Of course. You fill that void within me that's always been there."

Magdiel sighed. "Of course I do." She knelt down, too, so her face was level with his. "David, you've done some terrible things. I can't approve of them, but I'm hardly in a position to criticize. I've done things that you couldn't conceive of, even in your darkest dreams. However, I've done something to you that's dangerous for me. I can't allow that to continue. I might enjoy it too much. I'm sorry David, but this is goodbye."

She reached out and gently caressed his face, then leaned forward to kiss him briefly. Even as she pulled away, she was chanting softly under her breath. David looked at her in puzzlement and then in panic as he felt his body begin to change.

Magdiel watched sadly as his hair turned gray. A network of fine lines flew across his skin, which slowly lost flexibility as the lines became creases, then wrinkles. After a few moments, his now wizened body lost the strength to stay kneeling and pitched forwards. As it fell, his head, now little more than a skull, came away in her hands. She watched it crumble, until the dusty remains tricked away between her fingers.

Magdiel stood up, brushed herself down and headed for the door. As she passed the table in the hall, she paused for a moment and picked up his keys. She couldn't afford to take a thrall, but there was no sense in wasting a potentially useful residence.

* * *

She stood outside the terraced house in Leytonstone for a good five minutes before she decided to go in. The lights were on. Tony was at home. The need for human acceptance, no, adoration burned within her as strongly as ever. Could she really accept it on terms beyond her control? Would human love be enough, or would she always seek their worship as well? How long could she hide her true nature from this man she liked to believe was her husband?

She shook the questions away. She had time enough to worry about those later. Giving up David had been hard enough. Hiding in Anila's life a little while, curled up in her husband's loving arms, might ease the need for the time being. She wanted to feel his love again, to lose herself in the sensations of sex, in the hope that she could forget the rush of David's belief.

After that? Well, she had a long time to work that out. She was Elohim after all. She would be here when the world ended. The future could take care of itself for a while. Her questions for Lucifer could wait.

Now, she needed to rest. Taking a deep breath, she put the key in the lock and opened the door .

CONTRIBUTORS

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Philippe Boulle is the managing editor of White Wolf Fiction, and thus spends far too much time thinking about vampires and other things that go bump in the night. He is the author of a variety of roleplaying games, **Tribe Novel: Red Talons**, **Vampire: A Morbid Initiation**, and the science-fiction novellas *Heavy Gear: Crisis of Faith* and *Heavy Gear: Blood on the Wind.* He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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Carl Bowen has written several short stories, a couple of novels and a couple of novellas for White Wolf, as well as a decent bit of supplementary game material. By day, he's a copyeditor and part-time developer for the company. (In fact, he copyedited **Demon: The Fallen**, the basis for this anthology.) In his spare time, he shoves camels through the eyes of needles.

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Ellen Porter Kiley is a freelancer from Pittsburgh who's happy to finally be getting some mileage from that English degree. She has a charming husband, two kids, two cats, and she has been known to bake cookies in 90 degree weather. Sometimes she'll even share.

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A Chicago native and longtime science-fiction and mystery fan, Diane Piron-Gelman writes murder mysteries when not busy wreaking havoc on the world with her four-year-old son. "She Kindly Stopped for Me" is her first published horror short story. Other published work includes short game-related fiction for *Shadowrun*™, *Earthdawn*™, and *DC Heroes*™, as well as two full-length *BattleTech*™ sourcebooks. Her favorite authors include Ruth Rendell, Edgar Allan Poe, M. K. Wren and Guy Gavriel Kay.

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Sarah Roark has been sweating in the bowels of the White Wolf freelancer dungeon for several years now, where she writes both game material and fiction. She also leads a lamentably secret double life as a violinist, violin teacher and nascent rock-n-roller in the Seattle area. Since even all this put together doesn't quite sate her masochistic streak, she also co-authors the Dark Spiral website *A World Lit Only by Fire* with her evil conspirators, Myranda Kalis and Janet Trautvetter (beware the power of three...). She shares her life, and occasionally the bedcovers, with her husband Brett and the world's two most adorable cats.

Lucien Soulban, *Gingerbread Houses*

Lucien Soulban does not exist. He is a name White Wolf uses when too many writers contribute to a project. He did not write, edit or develop books for White Wolf, Pinnacle, Guardians of Order, or Dream Pod 9. He did not write fiction for the *Deadlands Anthology* or various game supplements, and he certainly doesn't live in Montreal, Quebec. You may now go about your business... no one to see here... move along....

Greg Stolze, *The Devil's Sugar*

Other than being a writer, Greg Stolze is resolutely mundane. He lives in a ranch-style house in the suburbs and drives a sensible car. He is a regular churchgoer. He recycles and worries about the bald patch on his lawn. If given half a chance, he will bore you silly talking about how adorable his baby son is. Spicy foods make him uncomfortable.

Adam Tinworth, *Taking His Name in Vain*

Adam Tinworth is a business journalist and writer. He lives in London with slightly more houseplants and Apple Mac computers than is healthy. When he's not furiously writing for anyone who'll pay him, he likes to potter around with yet more plants in the garden or dance the Argentine tango. Given another ten years, he might actually be a reasonably good dancer.